

sojourners

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Faith in Action for Social Justice

The Politics of Contraception

Why evangelicals joined the battle over birth control.

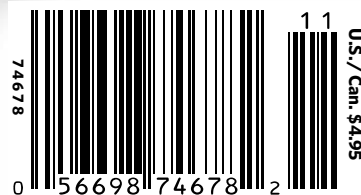
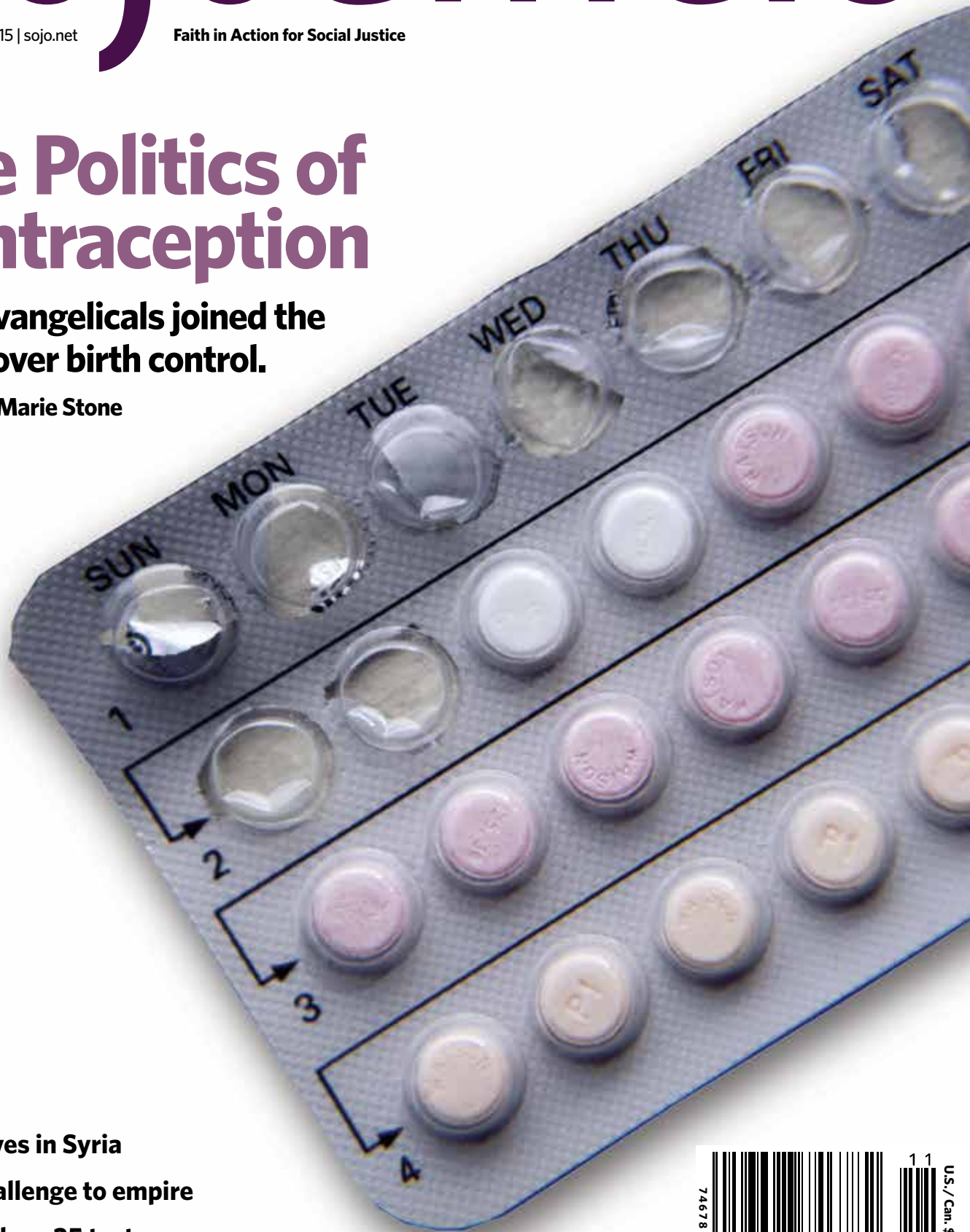
by Rachel Marie Stone

PLUS:

Saving lives in Syria

Paul's challenge to empire

The Matthew 25 test



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WORK FOR SHALOM **TOGETHER**

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THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SINCE THE FDA approval of the pill 55 years ago, and long before, contraception has been simultaneously controversial and very popular among religious adherents. The best-known example of that dichotomy, of course, is found in the Roman Catholic Church. While official Catholic teaching still includes a prohibition on birth control, as Rose Marie Berger explains in “On Rabbits and the Pill,” 78 percent of Roman Catholics around the world, according to a 2014 survey, support the use of artificial contraceptives.

Until recently, contraception wasn’t an

especially contentious issue for evangelicals, and the vast majority of evangelical couples used birth control. But as author Rachel Marie Stone explains in our cover story, forces on the political and Religious Right—motivated, Stone says, more by partisanship than by theology or religious liberty—have sought to change the evangelical politics of contraception.

Conservative evangelicals have aimed most of their ire at the fact that health



insurance policies under the Affordable Care Act include coverage of contraception, but the ramifications of their attacks on family planning and other resources for wom-

en’s health could be detrimental far beyond the ACA. People of faith and good will are right to view with suspicion any policies or actions, whatever the motivations behind them, that put the health of women and children at risk. ■

Letters

FAIR TO JUDGE?

Sojourners’ cover article (“Now is a Time for Theology to Thrive,” by Ryan Herring, September-October 2015) ignores the fact that the investigation showed that Michael Brown was no innocent victim and the “hands up, don’t shoot” meme was false.

Furthermore, [Herring’s] statements about the church and theology could have used a bit more consideration. For instance, he cites Caitlin Fair’s assertion: “We focus on things like helping the poor through coats and food drives ... this kind of participation is not only underdeveloped and irresponsible, but it is un-Christlike.” Just who the hell is Ms. Fair to judge what various churches are doing? This gets us nowhere.

David E. Dax
Lexington, Virginia

NUCLEAR MORALITY

I appreciate your magazine. It helps me not feel alone in a state that isn’t often sympathetic to your stance on many issues. But as a retired pastor and a retired U.S. Air Force pilot with combat experience, I cannot let go of the articles by Karen Swallow Prior (“Nukes and the Pro-Life Christian,” August 2015) and Atsuyoshi Fujiwara (“A Love That Disarms”).

History seems to tell us using these arms was the right thing to do to end (probably) the most justified war in humankind’s long exposure to armed conflict. The use of such weapons was thought moral by Niebuhr and others theologically thinking their way through the evils of the time. Prior, quoting

“I am proud to be pro-choice and even prouder to be pro-woman.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., highlights the need for Christians “to struggle with the morality of our atomic age.” People who have not experienced combat can only judge those making decisions in combat after struggling with what it was like to make those decisions.

Robert Turk
Ft. Worth, Texas

GIVE WOMEN CREDIT

The cover story (“Nukes and the Pro-Life Christian”) comparing nuclear war to abortion was just totally out of line, not at all consistent with the more moderate stance that I’ve always appreciated with *Sojourners*. In fact, I really believed that the staff at *Sojourners* was trying to help reach middle ground on this issue, as with other controversial topics. Terms such as “abortion-on-demand” serve only to inflame a debate that already causes enough violence, anger, and rhetoric. I am proud to be pro-choice and even prouder to be pro-woman, because being pro-woman is really the crux of this issue. Let’s give women credit for being able to make choices about what will impact our bodies not only for nine months but also for the rest of our lives. Empowering women to stand against gender-based violence must

include the ability to make choices about all aspects of our lives.

Kathy W. Walker
Hampden, Maine

AN UNFORGETTABLE ATROCITY

In Karen Swallow Prior’s excellent article “Nukes and the Pro-Life Christian,” she quotes R. Albert Mohler Jr. questioning “the conventional narrative that dropping the bombs saved lives by ending the war.”

It would have been important for Prior to make clear her opinion with respect to that question. Perhaps it is a given for readers that *Sojourners* considers that bombing was immoral. Pardon the intrusion by this veteran of WWII who has not let that atrocity out of his mind since flying over Nagasaki three days after. Keep up the great work.

Peter C. Hinde, OCarm
Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

CORRECTION

In our September-October issue, we misidentified Jann Aldredge-Clanton. She is the author of *Changing Church* and other books.

Get the last word. Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, *Sojourners*, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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BY JIM WALLIS

The Matthew 25 Test



AS THE SEASON turned from summer to fall, I was reflecting again about Sojourners' vocation, the focus of our mission and ministry.

Matthew 25:31-46 is my own conversion text, the scripture that brought me to Christ a long time ago out of the radical student movement. It's also been a converting text for many others here at Sojourners over the years.

The 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel has been foundational to Sojourners from the very beginning of the Sojourners community more than 40 years ago. But I am realizing that Matthew 25 is not only foundational for us, it is really our vocational text. In other words, it shapes not just what we believe and what we stand for, but also what we

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

When I first read this text as a student activist, I felt it was the most radical thing I'd ever encountered, more so than any of the authors whose work influenced the radical student movements of the 1960s. Here is the son of God telling his followers that how we treat the most vulnerable, the poorest, and most marginalized people in our society is the same as how we treat him. Very simply put, how much we love those at the bottom of society is how much we love Christ. And the text goes on to say, "Just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did *not* do it to me." This is one of the few texts of judgment in the New Testament, and the judgment is on those who mistreat the most vulnerable. This text always reminds me why I've learned the most about the world, and my own life and work, by being in the places I wasn't supposed to be and being with people I was never supposed to meet or become friends with. Matthew 25 has continued to convert me over and over again in new ways.

INDEED, A NEW understanding of Matthew 25 is why Sojourners has become so active on the issue of climate change. This great challenge led us to re-exegete Matthew 25 in relation to climate change. We discovered that virtually all who Jesus named as "the least of these" in this passage are being affected by climate change already, and will be the ones most devastated by climate

change in the future. For the hungry—massive food shortages and starvation. The thirsty—more terrible droughts. The naked—stripping millions of all their resources. The stranger—dislocating millions more as migrants. The sick—spreading more disease. The prisoner—more destabilization, chaos, desperation, and crime.

This reality shows us that climate change isn't just "an issue" among many to elevate on our list of priorities and see how it measures up to our commitment to ending poverty, promoting peace, and so forth. Rather, it impacts all the other things we care about—it's integral to all of those other issues. Pope Francis named it as such in his recent encyclical, where he articulates an "integral ecology" that makes clear that our relationships to God, to our neighbors, and to the earth itself are all interconnected and interdependent.

How we as a society treat "the least of these" is the test of a nation's righteousness and integrity. Indeed, Matthew 25 should be the test of our politics. The least of these should be at the top of our political agendas, when right now they're the last people who candidates and politicians generally talk about.

For Sojourners, Matthew 25 is the heart of our history, ministry, and vocation, and it always will be. My prayer is that we as an organization—along with all of you who are part of our larger extended Sojourners community and family through this magazine, your gifts to us, our website, our email list, and our campaigns—will judge how we live our lives and do our work by this text: the Matthew 25 test. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

Climate change isn't just "an issue" like other issues.

do as an organization—the issues we address, the campaigns we get involved in, the statements we sign, the coalitions we join, and much more.

In that sense, I've been thinking about Matthew 25 in relation to issues of organizational stewardship and sustainability. Autumn is always a busy season for me and for Sojourners. Faced with many invitations, requests, and opportunities to make a positive impact on a variety of issues, how do we decide where and how to focus our ministry, energy, staff, time, and gifts? How do we be good stewards of our calling? I think that Matthew 25:31-46 provides the answer. The key moment in the passage is when Jesus says:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

Trinity UCC, Chicago



By Any Greens Necessary

Vegetables grown by black farmers from Pembroke, Ill., line the stalls of the farmers market at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, connecting struggling farmers to what senior pastor Otis Moss III calls an urban “food swamp and food desert.” As a member of the Green the Church initiative, Trinity has joined other African-American churches in implementing sustainable strategies—including solar power, energy efficiency, and healthy eating—that promote economic flourishing, care for the earth, and the overall well-being of the community.

By Siki Dlanga

United We Stand

Why young activists, from Cape Town to Charleston, need to find common cause to transform the “giants of our generation.”

IT SEEMS AS though after liberation, the voice of conscience left the South African public sphere and retired to a quiet church life, so that the current generation barely knows that the church ever influenced South African political and public affairs.

On the day of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration, Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously announced that he was returning to do the “real” business of the church by leaving politics to qualified politicians. Years later, during the era of President Jacob Zuma, Tutu often lamented about the undesirable state of the country under the current leaders. He must have forgotten that by leaving politics to politicians in 1994, he too played a role in leading the nation to this position he now regrets.

Kairos South Africa recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. Church leaders from as far as Norway, the U.S., and Palestine all remembered how the 1985 Kairos document taught the worldwide church a hopeful

language to address injustice. Yet now the majority of young people in South Africa do not know anything about this heroic church history.

South African anti-apartheid leader Allan Boesak referred to the Kairos movement as a “dangerous memory.” It does indeed have the *potential* to be a dangerous memory—one that should be remembered by every one of the Christians who make up 81 percent of the South African population. Unfortunately, it is a memory held by only a select older minority.

How can this change? This summer several members of the new generation of South African Christian leaders traveled to the U.S. to study how to be effective Christian agents of social justice. At the Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina, I listened to Bree Newsome explain that it was her faith in God that gave her the courage to pull down the Confederate flag at the South Carolina capitol after the massacre at

Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. “You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today!” she said.

Miles Giljam, Gaynore Cele, and Msizi Cele, some of South Africa’s emerging Christian leaders, participated in the Sojourners Leadership Summit in June and met with Ferguson-based organizers of Black Lives Matter.

For South Africans, this summer’s events in the U.S.—Charleston, the Confederate flag, the death of Sandra Bland in a Texas jail, and far too many lost black lives that are added to the list of intolerable racist acts and police brutality—are haunting reminders of our own apartheid South Africa.

Young people must stand together, even across continents, to defeat the giants of our generation. In a global world, our fight for justice is, in truth, a fight for humanity. We fight for the unjust person to change just as

Our Mission

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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much as we fight for the unjustly treated to have their justice.

As young South African leaders and members of Freedom Mantle, we are called to be like the biblical hero Joshua, since Mandela was like Moses to us. Moses led the people to freedom. Joshua led the people into the promised land. The important work of the anti-apartheid generation got us out of slavery but did not lead us to the promised land. We now pick up Joshua's mantle.

Among the many challenges remaining in our country is the looming giant of corruption, which must be tackled before all the rest. Unite Against Corruption, a civil society

effort led by churches and unions is bringing thousands of South Africans into the streets to call the nation to repentance and shine a light on corrupt government practices. The task before us is formidable. But we are confident that if we are faithful, just, and persistent—like Joshua—God will lead us to our inheritance. ■

Siki Dlanga (@SikiWrites) is on the South African Christian Leadership Initiative steering committee and is a founder of Freedom Mantle, dedicated to awakening a new generation of leaders in a post-Mandela South Africa.

By Edward O. Flores

Thinking Outside the Box

After prison, how can you make restitution if you can't get a job?

IN DECEMBER 2011, Eddie Bocanegra, a congregational organizer-in-training, invited me to a meeting held by members of the Illinois-based Community Renewal Society (CRS), a faith-based organization that works with communities to address institutional racism and poverty. I was researching how faith-based organizations facilitated recovery from gang life. However, I was also to learn how formerly incarcerated persons use faith to change their communities.

There were 30 people at the meeting—black, white, and Latino—from diverse Christian backgrounds: Baptist, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. First, Bocanegra shared his testimony: The Illinois governor and the United Nations had recognized Bocanegra for his work in violence prevention, but the stigma of his old gang life and criminal record overshadowed his qualifications for employment.

We were asked to think of solutions to “records discrimination.” One person recalled visiting the state capital to lobby for ban-the-box legislation to remove the felony conviction question from employment applications. From that meeting arose a campaign against records discrimination. With the guidance of a CRS organizer, Bocanegra helped found and lead an ex-offender-led civic group called Fighting to Overcome Records and Create Equality (FORCE). Eighteen months later, FORCE earned its

first legislative victory: Illinois House Bill 3061, which expanded the list of offenses that can be sealed for employment application background checks.

The National Employment Law Project reports that people like Bocanegra are not alone—65 million Americans have a criminal record. Even for those with low-level convictions, a criminal record carries a stigma and often relegates them to unemployment. While the dominant narrative of re-entry tells us that if the formerly incarcerated obey laws and accept social conditions they will be redeemed as good citizens, this is simply not true. In fact, such “blanket discrimination” against formerly incarcerated persons has a racially disparate impact that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

We are entering a new chapter in American carceral policy. Activists and advocates are waging and winning campaigns to decriminalize low-level drug use and to regulate how criminal records are used in job applications and interviews. The ban-the-box movement has led to the removal of the felony conviction question from public employment applications in 18 states, and state bills such as California's Proposition 47 will redirect hundreds of millions of tax dollars from prisons to education and mental health. “We see this as a social justice” cause, said Karen Lang, a Prop. 47

From the Archives

November 1985

Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

AS A member of Sojourners Community, I make my home in Southern Columbia Heights—a place in which it's all too easy to miss seeing the beauty and courage that lie alongside the suffering of low-income families. I see people crowded, pushed one against the other. Children are often afraid, preoccupied with fears of violence. I feel a wave of despair each time another ambulance screams past my bedroom window on its way to the hospital.

Our neighbors struggle to make ends meet, and we are trying to stand with them. But gradually my faith has worn thinner and thinner. All the old expressions of praise and faith no longer seem to hold much meaning.

Yet into the midst of this hopelessness has come a weekly hour when an entirely different side of the neighborhood comes before me. On Monday evenings a few of us from Sojourners gather with some of our neighbors at our neighborhood ministry center. We sing and pray a little, but most of all we study scripture together. ... Sometimes we sing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarm. Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms. The words describe our total dependence on a God who wants to hold and carry us as a mother. In this world, and in this neighborhood, I need to trust that God. Thanks to my friends, I'm drawn more and more to do just that. ■

Patty Burkhardt lived in Washington, D.C., and worked as a medical technologist when this article appeared.



organizer. "We have been punishing crimes of poverty."

Religion has played a prominent role in campaigns to expand the rights of the formerly incarcerated. Theologian Helene Slessarev-Jamir argues that "varied ways of framing the prophetic have historically been used in the United States either to enhance or restrict ... the space necessary for a democratic politics." The CRS organizing efforts are examples of the church opening and holding democratic space for prophetic action.

The ban-the-box movement was formed in 2003 by the civic group All of Us or None. By 2012, faith-based organizers through PICO National Network were leading various local and regional ban-the-box campaigns. To date, more than 100 municipalities have adopted ban-the-box ordinances.

Now there is a movement for national reform. In 2013, PICO asked President Obama to support removal of the felony conviction question from employment applications. In 2015, secular and faith-based groups are urging the president to issue an executive order to remove the conviction question from federal contractors'

employment applications.

Faith-based community organizing can empower those on the margins by making the democratic process accessible. Faith can provide the moral conviction necessary to engage those on the margins. And faith groups can provide the platform for those on the margins to be heard.

We are finally beginning to seriously consider the idea of reducing incarceration rates. Now it is important to understand the limits of prisoner re-entry programs—and the powerful role faith groups can play. Prisoner re-entry only integrates formerly incarcerated persons into the world *as it is*. But faith-based community organizing offers the possibility of transforming the world into what *it can be*. In movements such as ban-the-box, it is vital that people of faith provide spaces for formerly incarcerated persons to not only change themselves, but to change the communities to which they are returning. ■

Edward Orozco Flores, author of God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery, teaches at the University of California, Merced.

By Katey Zeh

Congrats, Mom! Now, Back to Work

Becoming a pro-family church (paid parental leave is a good place to start).

LAST NOVEMBER, when my daughter turned 2 weeks old, I returned to full-time work. Five days after her birth I was on email. Within a week I was taking work calls. I wasn't a workaholic. I was a new mom without paid family leave.

Several years earlier, when I was single and singularly focused on my career, I'd been hired as a contractor for the United Methodist Church to direct a grassroots campaign on maternal health. I never stopped to consider what effect my employment status might have if I decided to have a child of my own. When my husband and I got pregnant, I faced the stark reality that there were no policies in place to protect or support me.

Sadly, my experience is commonplace. A recent report revealed that one in four U.S. women return to work within two weeks of giving birth. While the Family and Medical

Leave Act (FMLA) protects employees' jobs for up to 12 weeks after the birth or adoption of a child, only about 60 percent of U.S. workers meet the eligibility requirements, including only 19 percent of new moms. And since the FMLA does not require employers to provide *paid* leave, those who are eligible and need time off do not always take it because they cannot afford the loss of income.

With no federal paid-family-leave program and only a handful of states with their own, churches and other employers that do provide paid parental leave are left to foot the bill for it. Oftentimes they offer this benefit exclusively to their highest earners. The United Methodist Church, for example, does have a national parental-leave policy of up to 12 paid weeks, but it is only available to pastors. Staff of the denomination's agencies, such as the one I work for, are offered up to

18 days of paid leave, after which they must use accumulated vacation or sick days or take unpaid leave. But as a lay person and a contractor, I was not eligible for either policy.

Before I had my daughter, I was optimistic about my return to work soon after her birth. I pictured scenes of my infant sleeping soundly in her bassinet while I responded to emails and wrote reports from home. The reality was otherwise. I distinctly remember bursting into tears during a conference call about maternal health when my daugh-

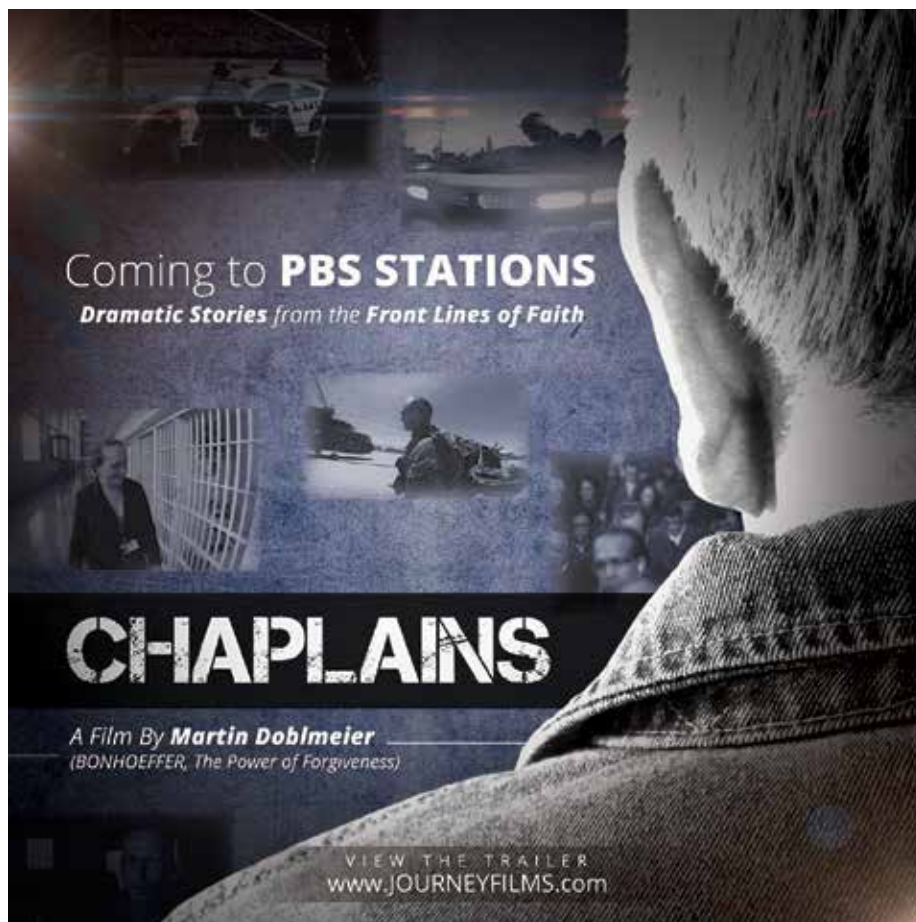
Paid family leave is a perk for a privileged few, but the faith community can be a leader in changing this.

ter began to cry and needed to nurse. As I held the phone in one hand and my daughter in the other, I couldn't resolve the tension of advocating for other moms while not having adequate time to care for my own infant daughter or myself.

Currently, paid family leave is a perk for a privileged few, but the faith community can be a leader in changing this. Churches and faith-based organizations that currently lack a policy should be proactive in forming one. Baptist Women in Ministry (bwim.info) have several examples from which to work. Some amount of parental leave should be available to all employees, including men, part-time staff, and hourly workers—and ideally it should be paid leave, at least partially. Faith communities can continue to support parents as they return to work by including provisions for flexible hours, reduced hours at full pay, or accommodations for home-based work.

As people of faith we are called to recognize that we bring our full selves to our work, including our relationships that need nurturing and care. Providing family leave is a prophetic act that honors God as we love our neighbors—and their families—as ourselves. ■

***Katey Zeh**, founder of Sacred Worth Consulting in North Carolina, is a strategist, writer, and educator who works with nonprofits and faith communities.*



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An illustration of an angel with large, colorful wings and a halo, holding a staff. Next to the angel is a smartphone displaying the 'ThisDay' app interface, which shows the same angel illustration. The background is a solid blue color.

An Evangelist for Engagement

THIS YEAR MARKS the 50th anniversary of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, the 1965 proclamation on “the relation of the church with non-Christian religions.” I want to celebrate a great theologian whose life intersects with that moment and whose work exemplifies its ethic.

Paul Knitter grew up in a strong working-class Catholic family on the South Side of Chicago and felt the call to the priesthood in his early teens. After four years of seminary high school and two years of additional novitiate training, he joined the Divine Word Missionaries (or SVD), an order whose main work was bringing non-Catholics into the Catholic faith. His regular prayers included the line “May the darkness of sin and the night of heathenism vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace.”

Reflecting back on this practice in his book *One World, Many Religions*, Knitter writes: “We had the Word and Spirit; they had sin and heathenism.

He found himself wondering whether “sin and heathenism” were the correct terms for a tradition that could inspire such beauty.

We were the loving doctors; they were the suffering patients.”

Knitter’s journey took a number of unexpected turns. As he sat with the other seminarians listening to the stories of returned SVD missionaries, he discovered that he was fascinated by the slide shows of Hindu rituals and Buddhist ceremonies. He even detected a hint of admiration in the voices of older SVD priests as they described the elaborate non-Christian religious systems that they encountered on their missions. One brought in an Indian dance group and explained that their performance



Paul Knitter

Arts at Birmingham

was developed in a Hindu context but had been adapted to glorify Jesus. Knitter was entranced by the intricacy of the movements, and he found himself wondering whether “sin and heathenism” were the correct terms for a tradition that could inspire such beauty.

Knitter was hoping to evangelize in Japan, and so he began a study of that nation’s history and culture. In his reading, he came across Zen Buddhism and found himself deeply moved by “the rigor of its practice, the claimed illumination and peace of the satori experience. There was much I couldn’t fit into my Christian categories; there was much I liked.”

In 1962, Knitter’s studies took him to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome where he began studying with the renowned Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, who was struggling to articulate the relationship between his notion of Christian uniqueness and the clear worthiness of other religions.

Something else was taking place in Rome in 1962—the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. As the church conducted its business in Latin, and as Knitter’s language skills were markedly better than those of many of the bishops who were a formal part of the Council, on a nightly basis he found himself

being asked by sheepish bishops to translate *sub secreto* (confidential) church documents. One of these documents was the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” Knitter was ecstatic to read the positive statements about the truth and values of religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in an official church document. It provided him just the affirmation he needed.

This was one of those times when personal biography and world history intersected with cosmic effect. To borrow a line from a recent U2 song: Paul Knitter was waking “up at the moment when the miracle occurred.” He would go on to do a doctorate in Protestant approaches to other religions, become among the most prominent Christian theologians of interfaith cooperation in the world, and continue to cultivate a deeply appreciative knowledge of other traditions, culminating in his most recent book *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.

All along he has remained an evangelist—for engagement, understanding, and appreciation. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the *Interfaith Youth Core*, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American of Indian heritage.

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MYTH

and consequences



How contraception became controversial among evangelicals.

by RACHEL MARIE STONE

NOT LONG AGO, a friend asked my opinion about birth control pills. She and her husband, who have several young children, wanted to use them, but she had misgivings.

She had read an article by a Christian couple that had frightened her. “They basically just blasted the entire idea of using hormonal birth control on the basis that it is pretty much abortion,” she said.

Although evangelical sex manuals from the 1970s, including Ed and Gaye Wheat’s *Intended for Pleasure*, advocated the pill as a means of enjoying the delights of the marital bed without fear of pregnancy, some evangelicals today have a very different perspective. A recent *Christianity Today* blog series on contraception that I participated in received vigorous and occasionally vitriolic responses, despite giving voice to a range of perspectives: Advocates of hormonal contraception were featured alongside proponents of natural family planning.

How is it that contraception has become a religious battlefield—even, or perhaps especially—among evangelical Protestants?

A certain myth currently in circulation among conservative Christians (Catholic and evangelical alike) harkens back to a pre-contraceptive past when parents welcomed innumerable children, each as a gift from God. In this mythical narrative, the advent in the 1960s of the modern contraceptive pill fostered in people a “hedonistic mentality” and made them “unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality.” After the pill, children were no longer seen as gifts, but as burdens—“diseases” to be vaccinated against. If, despite

precautionary measures, a woman conceived, then her modern “contraceptive mentality” would all but determine that she have an abortion. “Abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception,” wrote Pope John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

Echoing *Evangelium Vitae*, in 2006 Southern Baptist leader Al Mohler called for the “rejection of the contraceptive mentality that sees pregnancy and children as impositions to be avoided rather than as gifts to be received, loved, and nurtured.” He also charged that the “effective separation of sex from procreation” was “one of the most ominous” and “important defining marks of our age,” leading to all kinds of sexual degradation.

The implication, of course, is that earlier ages were more closely aligned with God’s will and with “natural law,” the classical philosophy praised by Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

According to Catholic teaching, marital intercourse should be “unitive” and “procreative”—both strengthening the couple and producing children. To separate these two roles is a sin. But 50 years ago, the Catholic Church almost changed its teaching. A papal commission was charged with examining population growth, the family, and children. It included scientists and Protestant theologians as well as practicing Catholics who shared stories of “women worn out by multiple pregnancies, medical problems, and the financial burdens of raising large families.” The commission was nearly unanimous in its recommendation to

Johanna Parkin/Getty Images



the pope that the ban on contraception be lifted. However, three dissenting bishops met privately with the pope and convinced him that overturning the ban would undermine church authority. And so the ban remains, though it is largely ignored by the laity.

Linda Gordon is a historian who has studied the social history of birth control. “Every known human society tried to practice some kind of reproductive control,” says Gordon. As to the claim that people in a halcyon, pre-technological age welcomed the fruits of their sexual union more eagerly and joyfully than moderns, who regard them as impositions, “that’s just wrong,” according to Gordon.

It is true that larger families were and are more desirable in agricultural societies, especially in times and places in which

disease regularly took—and takes—infants’ and children’s lives. But in the early 20th century, among the working urban poor in New York City, for example, large families were an economic liability.

Neither were marriages necessarily “happier” or more open, self-sacrificing, and fruitful in earlier eras. One has only to look a little way into the history of contraception to see this claim’s patent hollowness.

In the U.S., letters between the 19th century abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband, Calvin Stowe, attest to the difficulty of marital abstinence. The couple repeatedly experimented with living apart so as to space pregnancies; the couple eventually had seven children. In one letter Calvin, a seminary professor, tells Harriet that having a male friend spend the lonely nights cuddling with him in bed was a great comfort in her absence: “He puts his arms around me and hugs me to my hearts’ [sic] content.” Other letters express what must have been considerable sexual frustration. To one of her many siblings, Harriet writes

with irritation of the tedious and demanding labor of frequent childbearing, childcare, and nursing.

Beyond talking points

What about the so-called “contraceptive mentality” leading to a culture of abortion, as indicated by Pope John Paul II?

Historically speaking, in the 1890s, when birth control was illegal in the U.S., doctors estimated that 2 million abortions were performed each year out of a population of 64 million people. In 2011, the CDC recorded 730,322 legal induced abortions out of a population of more than 300 million. The claim that abortion is a consequence of contraception or a “contraceptive mentality” isn’t merely tenuous: It’s wrong.

Still, some vigorously deny the utility of contraceptives in reducing abortion. Steven Ertelt, editor of LifeNews.com, wrote to me, “Contraception has not drastically reduced the number of abortions. Studies show that

On Rabbits and the Pill

The official Catholic teaching on contraception hasn’t changed—but lay Catholics worldwide follow their own moral reasoning • by ROSE MARIE BERGER

EARLIER THIS YEAR Pope Francis titillated the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics when he said we should not feel compelled to breed “like rabbits.” The Twitterverse resounded with commands to “hop to it.” The Italian press dubbed Francis’ speech the “Sermon of the Rabbit.”

In it, Pope Francis said, “Some think that—excuse the language—that in order to be good Catholics, we have to be like rabbits. No. Responsible parenthood.”

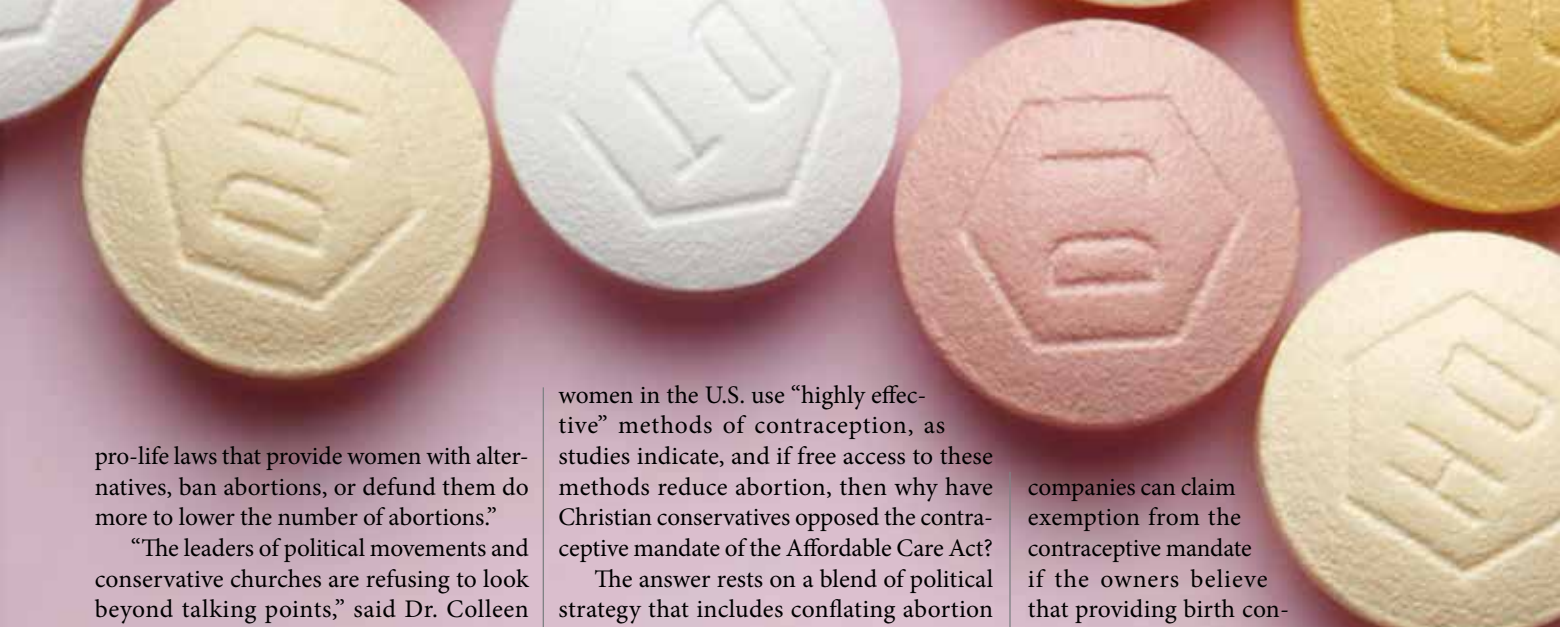
Was the pope changing Catholic teaching on birth control? On the contrary, Francis went on to underscore that “responsible parenthood” requires that couples regulate the births of their children, as Vatican teaching allows, using natural family planning methods.

What we think of as “the Catholic position” on contraception—“Every action which ... proposes to render procreation impossible” is intrinsically evil”—was actually codified as official teaching in 1930 under Pope Pius XI and was part of a larger

conversation in Christendom. At the 1930 Lambeth Conference, for example, the Anglican bishops approved a resolution stating: “In those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, other methods [of contraception] may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles.”

In 1951, Pope Pius XII overtly accepted natural family planning as a moral form of regulating births, in limited circumstances, within Christian marriage. He also emphasized the importance of a mature and informed conscience in moral reasoning. “It is correctly argued,” he wrote, “that the true meaning of adult independence is not to be led like a little child.”

As part of the process around the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI oversaw a commission to examine the use of oral contraceptives in light of church teaching. The commission’s report—titled “Responsible Parenthood”—argued for the use



pro-life laws that provide women with alternatives, ban abortions, or defund them do more to lower the number of abortions.”

“The leaders of political movements and conservative churches are refusing to look beyond talking points,” said Dr. Colleen McNicholas, an obstetrician-gynecologist and an assistant professor and researcher at the medical school of Washington University in St. Louis. In a study there, McNicholas and her colleagues found that offering free contraception to women—most of whom were poor and uninsured—significantly lowered rates of teen pregnancy and of abortion.

“Greater contraceptive access should not be a matter of debate,” McNicholas’ colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Peipert, told me. “Providing access, education, and no-cost contraception can drastically reduce unintended pregnancy and abortion. To claim otherwise is to completely dismiss evidence-based health care.”

If a majority of Catholic and evangelical

women in the U.S. use “highly effective” methods of contraception, as studies indicate, and if free access to these methods reduce abortion, then why have Christian conservatives opposed the contraceptive mandate of the Affordable Care Act?

The answer rests on a blend of political strategy that includes conflating abortion and contraception while advancing a particular definition of religious liberty that, in the spirit of *Citizens United*, allows corporations to have “religious consciences.”

Catholic bishops and conservative evangelicals opposed the mandate. Although churches and houses of worship that object to contraception were already exempted, faith-based nonprofits such as hospitals and universities were not. When it was argued that the ACA mandate infringed on religious freedom, President Obama offered a compromise.

But the opposition—seemingly motivated more by partisan politics than by theology or even religious liberty—continued. In *Sibelius v. Hobby Lobby*, the Supreme Court found that even certain for-profit

companies can claim exemption from the contraceptive mandate if the owners believe that providing birth control violates their beliefs. At the center of *Hobby Lobby’s* case were a handful of highly effective contraceptives, including some formulations of the pill, emergency contraceptives, and IUDs, which the *Hobby Lobby* owners claimed caused abortions.

Conservative political figures, including Sen. Ted Cruz, Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum, have all insisted that hormonal contraception, particularly Plan B, cause a kind of abortion by preventing the implantation of a fertilized egg on a woman’s uterine wall. This is disputed by much of the scientific and medical community, as well as some pro-life Catholic and conservative Protestant ethicists.

of artificial contraception within Christian marriage. In the end, Pope Paul VI rejected the commission’s recommendation, and his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed the church’s teaching against artificial contraception.

According to a 2014 survey of Roman Catholics around the world, 78 percent support the use of artificial contraceptives. Why? Because contraceptives are an imperfect yet prudent aid for spouses who are responsibly planning a family, for slowing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (in the case of male and female condoms), and for protecting sexually vulnerable women and girls.

The fact that most Catholics support the use of contraception shouldn’t necessarily be viewed as a lack of respect for Vatican teaching. It may mean that Catholic lay people have a different interpretation of the principles behind the instruction or are in a significantly different moral situation than those promulgating the teaching.

Whether or not an official discussion on use of artificial contraception arises again under Pope Francis, *Humanae Vitae* contains wisdom we desperately need now. It prophetically acknowledges the fear that “world population is going to grow

faster than available resources,” worries about a loss of reverence for the body, that men will reduce women to “a mere instrument for the satisfaction of [male] desires,” and warns against the danger of governments intervening “in the most personal and intimate responsibility of husband and wife.”

Pope Francis extends these themes when he warns against a one-size-fits-all contraceptive policy imposed by developed nations and multinational NGOs that can result in “ideological colonization.” And in his recent encyclical *Laudato Si’*, he writes, “To blame

population growth, instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues.”

Pope Francis’ “rabbit” sermon cites the most generous aspect of current Catholic teaching *and* raises up the moral value of responsible parenthood—emphasizing a pastoral response over a dogmatic one. The church’s ultimate challenge to Christians today is not the choice between natural family planning and the pill—it’s about a radical reorientation of values that prioritizes life and builds up a civilization of love. ■

Rose Marie Berger is a senior associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

78 percent of Catholics support the use of artificial contraceptives.



McNicholas said that the possibility of certain forms of birth control preventing a fertilized egg from implanting are very, very slight. “The pill and Depo-Provera [a contraceptive injection] are forms of hormone that are made by our body naturally and work by suppressing ovulation,” she said. Their primary function is to prevent an egg from being available to be fertilized in the first place, as well as preventing the fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus.

McNicholas described this discussion as

are debated and theoretical, Paris said, “we have to think about the consequences of our theology, and this is not humane theology.”

Paris, who teaches college students, says she’s known well-intended young evangelicals who, not wanting to fall prey to the “contraceptive mentality,” have “too many children too young, and realize that their beliefs are not permitting them to have a healthy adulthood or a healthy marriage—it can undermine everything they thought they knew about God.”

Top-down theology?

Despite vocal opposition to the ACA’s contraceptive mandate by some evangelicals, other evangelical leaders are increasingly willing to support contraception and family-planning

“We have to think about the consequences of our theology, and this is not humane theology.”

“get[ting] into the weeds a little bit,” affirming that “matters of faith or personal belief (particularly when they are incongruent with medical facts) should only guide the medical care of the individual who holds such a belief”—not public policy.

Nonetheless, whether by labeling certain highly effective methods of birth control as “abortifacient” or by ruefully reflecting on the supposedly innovative and deleterious “contraceptive mentality,” conservative politicians, their strategists, and religious allies have galvanized opposition to President Obama’s signature legislation.

I talked with Jenell Paris, a professor of anthropology at Messiah College, who has thought and written carefully about birth control for decades. “I think there is a moral difference between a uterus (theoretically) rejecting a fertilized egg and ending an established pregnancy,” Paris says she has talked with many women who have cried about the “abortions” they worry that the pill may have caused—women, she said, who have been “consumed with guilt and convinced that they had killed dozens of babies.” Given that we know that hormonal birth control never works primarily by inhibiting implantation and that its purported “abortifacient” qualities

education for women in developing nations. Hope Through Healing Hands, an organization galvanizing faith-based support for such efforts, sent a letter last year to Congress, signed by more than 60 prominent evangelicals, articulating the hope that Congress would prioritize funding for USAID’s global maternal health program. “When women and girls lack access to the education and resources they need to create a healthy plan for becoming mothers,” they wrote, “the result is tragic: 287,000 women in developing nations die from preventable complications during childbirth, and 6.6 million children die before their fifth birthday each year.”

Why would Americans of faith eagerly lend support to USAID-funded family planning programs that include contraceptive distribution while opposing efforts that would make contraceptives more accessible and affordable for women in the U.S.—particularly if some allege contraceptives create a culture that’s hostile to children and families? Perhaps it is because contexts in which people live in extreme poverty and women bear unlimited numbers of children are clearly *not* the idealized societies of a certain nostalgic vision of the pre-technological past. On the contrary: Family planning—particularly the

highly effective methods—helps stave off the gravest suffering and death of women and children in the most vulnerable areas of the earth.

When Christians speak to these issues publicly, they too often speak from positions of privilege. Top-down theology, like top-down politics, always seems to miss the lived experiences of ordinary people. Men have too often controlled the arguments surrounding contraception—how else could three Catholic bishops manage to persuade the pope to ignore the decision of a much larger and more diverse papal commission?

We know that contraception has the potential to do all sorts of good in the world: to help prevent maternal death, to help prevent infanticide and infant mortality and morbidity, to help prevent abortion. Contraception allows people to have healthy families and to make decisions for the wise stewardship of the resources of our fragile earth. Fertility is a blessing, but so is sex: the “procreative” and “unitive” in harmony, rather than lockstep.

Whatever the Song of Songs may be about, it is also about the delights of sex—with nary a baby in sight. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul commends marriage not for procreation, but for sexual continence, so that people will not be consumed with uncontainable passions. And throughout the New Testament, the concept of “fruitfulness” (associated in the Hebrew Bible with literal children) refers to making disciples and living into Jesus’ kingdom ethic—not to making babies.

And perhaps that, finally, is the story that Christians today should aspire to live within—not some historical fiction about a world that was more welcoming to babies because it lacked the means to prevent their conception, but a world where wisdom and knowledge serve the causes of justice, mercy, and human flourishing. ■

Rachel Marie Stone (@Rachel_M_Stone) is the author of *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God’s Gift of Food* (InterVarsity Press) and a regular contributor to *Christianity Today*’s *hermeneutics* blog.

Moving Forward in the Dark

ONE GAUGE OF global policies is how they affect people we may have never heard of. West Papuans, for example.

In March, I met Matheus Adadikam while he was visiting Washington, D.C. He's the general secretary of the Evangelical Christian Church in Tanah Papua, representing 600,000 people. Located between Australia and Indonesia, West Papua shares a South Pacific island with New Guinea. It's basically on the other side of the world from D.C.

Pastor Matheus told me about his country. Well, not exactly *his* country, he says. Indigenous Papuans have lived there for 40,000 years, but in the colonial era—and more recently, as a province of Indonesia—they've had no right of self-determination. "As a Papuan, we have no right to speak about our rights as Papuans," he says. "Forty years ago we 'became Indonesian,' so we can no longer speak of 'Papuan human rights.'"

West Papua is trapped on the frontlines of the global free-trade war.

The story is starkly familiar. Since the establishment of colonial economic forces, the land of Indigenous Papuans has been held in chattel slavery by those more powerful—English (1793), Dutch (1828), Japanese (1944), United Nations (1962), and now Indonesians (1963). "Killings, torture, and rape of Indigenous people are routine," according to the Center for World Indigenous Studies. A conservative estimate is that 100,000 people have been killed since 1963. "Even to raise our Morning Star flag is to die or be in jail," says Matheus. (One man is serving seven years in jail for flag-raising.)

In 1960, a rich vein of gold and copper was discovered in

the Jayawijaya mountain range in West Papua. After some back-room deals, the U.N. "gave" West Papua to Indonesia. Indonesia promptly welcomed the Phoenix-based Freeport-McMoRan mining company to open what became the largest gold and third-largest copper mines in the world.

"Justice, peace, and care of all of the Lord's creation is the main mission of our church," says Matheus, "but our experience has been that change happens fast, and external influences are changing who we are as a people."

His main mission now is traveling the world asking for help.

"The police and army have a personal economic interest in the mining companies," Matheus says. "As a pastor, I can say that the government tries to blame local people for the violence, but it is not true." The brutality of the Indonesian military in response to protest or self-determination can be seen in Joshua Oppenheimer's award-winning companion documentaries *The Look of Silence* and *The Act of Killing* and in a film about East Timor, *A Guerra da Beatriz*.

"In 2006, Indonesia declared us a 'separatist' church because we support the right of self-determination," Matheus says. "If we are not independent politically, then slowly but surely we will lose our Papuan life. ... Indonesia makes agreements with corporations to take our trees, our water, our resources, and they don't care at all about the people. They say, 'We don't need the Papuans, we just want their land.'"

"As a pastor I have seen too many people killed," Matheus continues. "When I was invited to speak at the World Council of Churches, while I was gone my family

was terrorized ... my wife and my kids ... this is our experience."

MATHEUS BROUGHT A flash drive with him, and I slip it into my computer port. First to pop up are Christian praise songs and family

photos—so that if the drive fell into the hands of Indonesian security, they would be quickly bored. These are followed by videos of the Indonesian military confronting crowds of protesting miners in Timika, photos of the dead along the road, interviews with police

at the morgue, close-ups of bullet wounds, and the insistent keening of angry women.

Now West Papua is trapped on the frontlines of the global free-trade war between China and the U.S. The Papuans are squeezed between the ASEAN free-trade zone and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Obama's "pivot to Asia" has slapped West Papua in the face—and no reporters are allowed in to see it.

In 1941, exiled Greek poet George Sefaris wrote, "[P]erhaps he was speaking of heroes—the night he dragged his foot through the darkened city—when he howled, groping over our pain: We advance in the dark, we move forward in the dark."

Matheus continues, "We don't need your money. The money you deliver to the Indonesian government, they use to buy more weapons to kill us."

Perhaps followers of Christ, dragging ourselves wounded through the world, can only advance like Sefaris' heroes, "forward in the dark." ■

Rose Marie Berger is a senior associate editor at Sojourners.



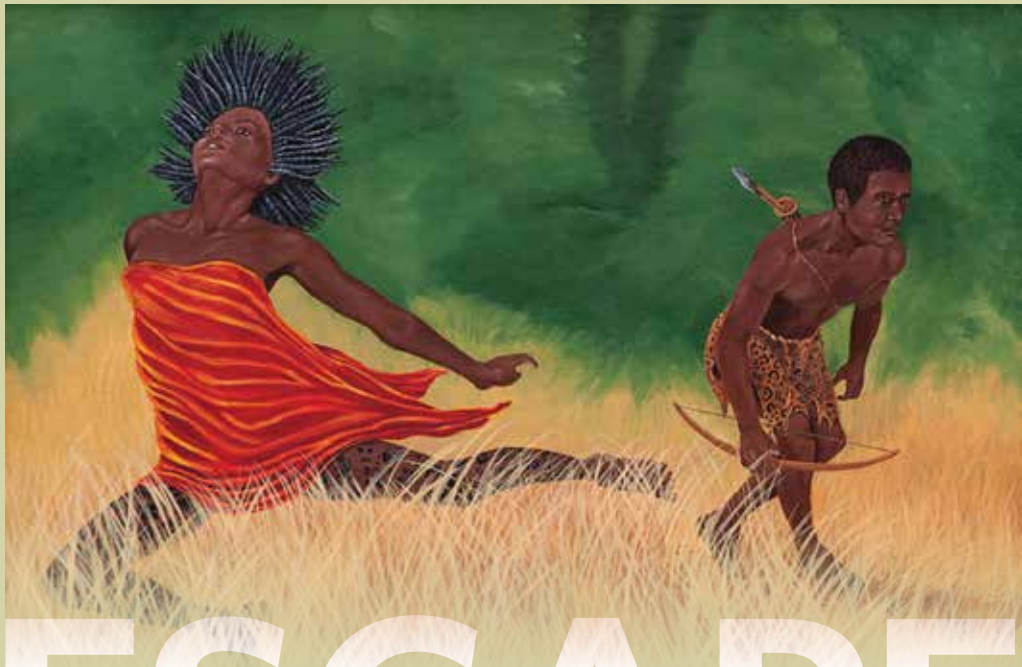
Matheus Adadikam

GKI-TP/Matheus Adadikam





"I was walking in the
shadow of death, but
I was able to escape into
the world I wanted, that
I was able to create
inside my head."



The Art of ESCAPE

How a man wrongfully convicted of murder used magazines, broken brushes, and paint to get free—and is teaching others to do the same.

by **ERIN TOCKNELL**

PROFESSIONAL-GRADE paint brushes are about 10 inches long, with enough heft to balance in one hand, allowing the artist the control necessary to usher an idea into paint-and-canvas reality.

For more than 20 years, Ndume Olatushani used brushes with handles that were mere stubs. Fearing that a full-length brush could be sharpened into a knife, officials at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tenn., cut them to about a third of their original length. To paint, Olatushani wet magazines and rolled them tightly around the broken ends. Once dry, the hardened pages worked almost as well as regular handles.

Olatushani would then prop a canvas on his knee—easels weren't allowed and his cell barely had space for one anyway—and paint.

The guards didn't want Olatushani to have a weapon, but he did: The magazine-handled brushes kept him alive, bringing to life the world of his mind decades before he was freed from the monochrome world of prison.

At left, Ndume Olatushani and, above, "Tracking the Dream," one of his paintings from prison.

Photo courtesy of Children's Defense Fund



"Art was freedom to me," Olatunshani explained. "I was literally walking in the shadow of death, but I was able to escape into the world I wanted, that I was able to create inside my head. Being able to do that made it possible for me to come through the other end."

A happy medium

In 1985, after a seven-day trial in which prosecutors withheld evidence, a key witness lied, and an alibi was overlooked, Ndume Olatunshani, then known as Erskine Johnson, was convicted of a murder that had been committed two years before. It took the all-white jury less than two hours to sentence him to death.

Thanks to the efforts of lawyers who took on his case pro bono in the '90s, Olatunshani's death sentence was overturned in 1998. And after nearly 27 years imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, he finally walked away from the Shelby County Jail in Memphis on June 1, 2012.

In prison, each day was dominated by guards, confinement, and an existence so rote Olatunshani could tell what day it was by

the breakfast pushed through the flap in his cell door. Now, three years after his release, the din of clanging doors has been replaced by the pleasant hum of daily life. As I talked with Olatunshani in his living room, his niece cooked veggie burgers in the kitchen while his great-niece watched over her infant daughter, who cooed and squealed. Outside, a neighbor's lawn mower whirled through the languid July afternoon.

Olatunshani met his wife, Anne-Marie Moyes, while she was working with a non-profit advocating on behalf of death-row inmates. The two became friends, eventually fell in love, and were married shortly after Olatunshani's release. The walls of the Nashville bungalow they share are adorned with paintings of dark-skinned men and women wearing bright kangas and turbans. In the foyer, a young boy wrapped in a yellow cloth carries a bundle of reeds. In the dining room, three women gaze and point in one direction, as if starting a journey together. Two carry infants; another holds a bright umbrella against the sun's glare.

A painting of several women projects a less hopeful view. They are hovering over food

baskets, scowling. One woman snatches a fish from a meager pile, the fish bending around her long fingers with the motion. "This one is about scarcity and stress," Olatunshani explained. "It's called 'Food Desert.'"

The paintings are vivid and precise; life seems to flow through the characters. Their eyes suggest memories, stories, and hopes; their clothing wrinkles with movement. Veins show on their hands. I wanted to lean in and ask these people where they were going, how they remained strong, if anyone knew how to make the fish last.

A visitor who didn't know better might assume these works were purchased at a posh gallery. But Olatunshani, who rarely traveled beyond his hometown of St. Louis before being extradited to his trial in Memphis, painted them all during the two decades he was on death row. He has continued painting ever since, but he keeps the death row works up in his home.

"It's almost a pleasant reminder of my whole struggle," he said. "Being on death row for 20 years or being locked up, period, is a stressful environment. It's oppressive, and all these different things serve to dehumanize

"Art was freedom to me," says Ndume Olatushani, who created "Food Desert," at left, about scarcity and stress, and "Winds of Change," at right.

and break people's spirits. For me, these paintings are representative that, even under those circumstances, I refused to be bent or bowed and was able to create, for lack of a better word, a happy medium."

The power of self-expression

By Olatushani's own admission, he "couldn't draw a crooked line straight" as a kid. And he only began painting in prison because he hated a portrait he'd commissioned a fellow inmate to draw. "It could have been [a picture] of you," he said, dryly. I laughed, because I am both a woman and white.

So with "nothing but time and a little space" to develop his talent, Olatushani taught himself to paint. But now that he is out of prison, Olatushani is passionate about helping young people discover their talent before they end up as he was: locked in a cell with all the time in the world.

Since his release, Olatushani has worked with the Children's Defense Fund, using creative expression to educate young people at schools, churches, and community centers in Nashville about what the CDF calls the "Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline." Through a six-week curriculum he created, Olatushani helps youth understand the systemic forces, such as privatization of prisons and school discipline policies, that land a young person in court instead of the principal's office. After the students watch and discuss films such as *Slavery by Another Name* and *Kids for Cash*, they start making art.

"I'm trying basically to inform and educate them about these systems that are operating around them. People are too quick to point fingers at young people and say how bad they are, when really it's not the kids that are bad, it's the systems that are operating around them—around us I should say—that are really bad," Olatushani explained.

With Olatushani's guidance, the youth become artists, creating murals, portraits, and puzzles—always projects that emphasize smaller pieces gathering into a larger whole. This past school year, young people in Olatushani's program took on their biggest exhibit yet: the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline School Desk Project. Each group at each



separate location was given a prison jumpsuit and a school desk to arrange and decorate as they saw fit. Once all the groups created their desks, they were arranged in rows as a "class." The installation has been displayed at a number of galleries in the city.

It was summer when I met with

And yet Olatushani has seen the empty jumpsuits bring his students to life. "A lot of kids start out, 'Naw, I can't do that. I don't know how to paint; I can't draw,'" he said. "You kind of drag them into it, but then, once they actually get into the project and begin to see the work that they're doing in

relation to the kids around them, they just really get into it and get engaged. They begin to not only see it coming together, but they begin to see that they

Life seems to flow through the characters. Their eyes suggest memories; their clothing wrinkles with movement. Veins show on their hands.

Olatushani, and his students were out of school, but a few of the desks were stored upstairs in his home. Their variety is striking: intricately graffitied jumpsuits; jumpsuits with money coming out of the pockets; a jumpsuit handcuffed to a Bible; a jumpsuit attached to actual working circuitry representing an electric chair. The emptiness of the prison clothes, stiffened with a fabric treatment to allow them to "sit" at the desks, gives a haunted impression, as if their occupants have been erased by greed and power.

are part of something larger than, you know, them."

Olatushani wants these teenagers to tap into the power of art and self-expression before it's too late. "I tell people that I was an artist before I was sitting on death row. I just didn't have the time or space or intervention that would allow me to explore my creativity or express myself the way I do now. I didn't have to be sitting on death row for that to come out. That just happens to be where I was."

It took the all-white jury less than two hours to sentence Olatushani, an innocent man, to death.

In prison, art became a way for Olatushani to rebel against the system that held him for nearly three decades. As long as his family continued to order supplies from a prison-approved art catalogue and send them to Olatushani, he was free.

"I knew was that I was freer than a lot of the officers that were coming in there every day," Olatushani said. "I knew who I was. I knew what I was. I knew what was going on around me, as opposed to some of these people who are just kind of a cog in this wheel ... A bunch of them were miserable. That's the thing that I was free from that they weren't. [Art] was this thing they couldn't take from me, and they certainly couldn't control it."

In the face of all these odds

Now free in both mind and body for more than three years, Ndume Olatushani continues to paint. His brushes have proper handles. He's learned to work while standing at an easel. And though the content of his

art is different, its vivid, lifelike style remains. "I'm not the type that, as an artist, I can create this abstract stuff," Olatushani said. "I still want to have my artwork reflect what's going on around me, even in terms of the work that I'm doing with young people and the importance of just wanting to be a facilitator, trying to get young people through to the other side."

One of the first things Olatushani told me is that he has been "happy as a lark" since winning his freedom, and our subsequent conversations bore that out. He joked easily and mentioned that his even-keeled temperament helped him emerge unscathed by his unjust incarceration.

However, some anger is good, and he confessed that he does get angry when he thinks about how the systems and prejudices that landed him in jail are still in motion. So he does what he can: He teaches and paints.

During an afternoon together at a coffee shop, Olatushani ate a piece of coconut cake

piled with frosting (he had requested the "sweetest dessert in the case") and described a painting he calls "Winds of Change," where four figures huddle together on a green mountaintop, features obscured by their blowing clothing.

"The idea was that in the face of all these odds, they had climbed a mountain out of a valley," Olatushani said. "Once they got to the place where they needed to be, they still had all this wind in their face, all this stuff, which is symbolic of anything that is holding you down. But rather than being beat back down the mountain, the idea is they turned their back to the wind and held the ground that they were able to gain until they were able to turn around and walk and fight some more." ■

Erin Tocknell is the author of Confederate Streets, a memoir that explores the history of desegregation efforts in Nashville. She teaches English and advises a writing-based outreach program in Chattanooga, Tenn.

THINGS NOT SEEN

Conversations about
Culture and Faith



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Riddle

what do you call
a skeleton
unburied, performing

a slow dance
in the wind,
limbs akimbo?

what can clothe
its own
nakedness

in misty scarves
of fluorescent
green?

what do you call a shelf
for sparrows, a ladder
for squirrels?

what can you
hang a swing from or
even a body?

*Linda Pastan's 14th book,
Insomnia, was released by W.W.
Norton in October.*

"Undeniable," mixed media artwork by Delro Rosco





Where the Sidewalk Ends

When it comes to assessing the needs of communities in the Rio Grande Valley, some groups have adopted a radical approach: Ask the people who live there • by CATHERINE CUELLAR

SIRI CANNOT TAKE you to the South Tower Estates in the southernmost Texas border community of Little Mexico. Among the more than 1,200 recognized colonias in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, South Tower is one of the more established: Streets are paved and lots have curbs, if not sidewalks—amenities that were required for colonias only after the adoption of model subdivision rules in 1989. A few solar-powered light fixtures even dot the streets at night.

But the neighborhood still is without city council representation. All residents are connected to the main thoroughfare between their homes and jobs by a single intersection. A dead dog in the middle of the road bakes in the hot summer sun.

Colonias began around the 1950s as semi-permanent camps in southwestern border states—Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California—developed by private landowners to house the farm workers they employed. Once the land was paid off, an owner was relieved of any responsibility to further maintain, much less improve, their property; many

landowners didn't fix or change a thing for decades. Today, amenities in colonias vary dramatically from one to the next, and many lack wastewater management, trash collection, and street lights.

Eva Carranza lives in South Tower Estates with her 15-year-old daughter. Like many families in their neighborhood, they have mixed documentation status. Eva's daughter is starting to think about college, but it's tough to get information about different schools' standardized test and GPA requirements, applications and deadlines, or available scholarships and loans. Though some families in their neighborhood have cell phone and internet access, few have a computer. Libraries offer web access—but there aren't any libraries in the colonias.

So Carranza turned to ARISE (“A Resource in Serving Equality”), a grassroots organization that helps youth and women who live in colonias through leadership development and education programs. Inspired by Luke 4:18—“God has chosen me to bring good news to the poor”—Catholic Sister of Mercy Gerrie

Photos courtesy ARISE and LUPE

Above, children holding signs during the Right to Light campaign for their colonia near the Mexico-U.S. border in Texas. At left, residents meet with their county commissioner regarding plans to end flooding in Colonia La Presa outside Laredo.



Naughton founded ARISE in 1987. Since then, ARISE, which is co-sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, the Daughters of Charity, and the Sisters of the Incarnate Word, has supported preschool education and summer reading programs for children in colonias. ARISE has also organized parent-teacher associations that give parents confidence to engage with their children's teachers and help area students matriculate and graduate.

At a summer meeting in ARISE's unincorporated Hidalgo County location, the smell of fresh cinnamon rolls and coffee mingled with the foul odor of wastewater as women laughed and chatted, reflecting on the just-concluded biennial Texas legislative session and gearing up for the start of another school year. According to executive director Lourdes Flores, the goal of ARISE is simple: Ask women what they want for their communities. Then give them the skills to help them get it.

A vision for a better life

Embedded in ARISE's goal is a philosophy of social change that assumes the people who know best what a community needs are the members of that community. It's a powerful philosophy, but it isn't new. During the 1980s, César Chávez started organizing United Farm Workers (UFW) in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Shortly thereafter, Texas Low Income Housing

Information Service, aka Texas Housers, expanded into the area from Austin, partnering with ARISE, UFW, and the Community Development Corporation of Brownsville (CDCB), among others. But after a late freeze destroyed the region's crops, followed by hurricanes and tropical storm-related flooding that destroyed members' homes, the UFW almost went out of business.

Instead, UFW members paused, reorganized, and relaunched in 2003 as LUPE: La Unión del Pueblo Entero. Despite their modest resources, LUPE members pay to join, and their grassroots community organizers (including many former agricultural workers) have advocated for everything from healthier working conditions and better neighborhood infrastructure to early childhood education and prison reform. The fruit of their labor can be seen around town, from OSHA training signs protecting workers with extended contracts to the installation of new electric street lights needed to safely illuminate roads for vehicles and pedestrians in eight colonias.

"I've been doing this a long time and believe ultimately in people getting organized with goodwill to take action to solve



problems at the local level," says Texas Housers' co-director John Henneberger. "The things I believe that hold the deepest solutions are ones where people in a community sit down, identify a concern, and organize together to engage the public and private sector to solve the problem based on a local need and a locally designed custom response to the problem."

Recently, about a dozen members from LUPE and ARISE partnered with Texas Housers to form a grassroots leadership development program. Their mission: to build a common vision and a set of solutions to make life in the Lower Rio Grande Valley better for working families.

The inaugural cohort of community organizers—who together are known as LUCHA ("Land Use Colonia Housing Action")—invested a year studying four subjects in-depth: land use, housing, public

Clockwise, from left, John Henneberger on the campus of La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) in the Rio Grande Valley; Maria Gomez, a LUPE representative, in front of her new home built with disaster recovery funding; and ARISE director Lourdes Flores.

services, and infrastructure. During their second year in the program, the leaders shared their newfound knowledge with the community groups they represent, attending and testifying at local town halls and in state board and commission hearings regarding the deployment of resources. They discovered that although the colonias do not belong to any municipality, their county commissioners were receptive to suggestions, even raising taxes to pay for public lighting that would make their communities safer. And while Texas' state legislature was unwilling to fund some of their ideas with taxpayer dollars, LUCHA discovered that the banks of the

Lower Rio Grande Valley had the capacity and inclination to privately fund expansion of their successful solutions.

Fighting climate change

Another major concern for community groups such as LUPE and ARISE has been protecting colonia residents from the ravages of climate change. For example, in the wake of Hurricane Dolly, which caused more than \$1 billion in damage to the Texas Gulf Coast, most residents displaced

from the Rio Grande Valley colonias were unable to rebuild. Federal government aid in rebuilding was slow and costly; reconstruction didn't begin until six years after the 2008 hurricane, and the temporary shelter offered by FEMA trailers was expensive, costing \$70,000 to \$75,000 per trailer. Not to mention the eventual cost of a permanent replacement house, an additional \$125,000.

Rather than wait for a solution devised by outsiders, Texas Housers, Lower Rio Grande Development Council, CDCB, and building community Workshop (bcWorkshop) collaborated to pilot RAPIDO, a \$2 million rapid rehousing recovery program that succeeded in creating prototypes for permanent 450- to 500-square-foot "core" houses, each equipped with a full bath, kitchen, bedroom, and living space that could be constructed in roughly a week for around \$15,000 to \$20,000 each, offering

almost-immediate shelter to displaced families and eliminating the need for FEMA trailers. And once emergency housing is no longer needed, these core homes can be converted into a permanent three- or four-bedroom house for an additional \$50,000

"People have the answers; it's just a matter of giving them the resources to put their knowledge into action."

to \$70,000—far less than the average cost of FEMA houses and trailers. So far, 20 permanent homes have been built in Texas' Willacy, Cameron, and Hidalgo counties; RAPIDO's partners CDCB and bcWorkshop are now working on a loan program with local Lower Rio Grande Valley banks to spread the model across Texas.

'Everybody deserves to live with dignity'

RAPIDO helped earn Texas Houser's Henneberger a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly called a "genius grant." Though Henneberger admits that the fellowship has helped Texas Housers get "listened to and taken seriously," he's embarrassed by all the fuss. "It's very affirming and humbling to receive, but we're doing the same things we were doing a year ago," he explains.

Those "same things" include empowering local residents to create their own solutions, including Henneberger's new Lower Rio Grande Valley regional co-director Josué Ramirez. "Even though I'd lived most of my life in a colonia, I was really unaware of the resources available to the colonia and the strong organizing happening," says Ramirez. He was undocumented when his parents brought him to the U.S. as a 5-year-old; he grew up in a colonia outside Los Fresnos, Texas. After graduating high school, Ramirez was able—through Texas' 2001 Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, or DREAM Act—to pay in-state tuition at the University of Texas-Austin, where he earned dual degrees in Mexican-American studies with a focus on policy and Spanish teaching. He worked on an unsuccessful political campaign in California, then moved back in with his parents in the colonia, applying to work for Texas Housers as a policy analyst.

"People have the answers; it's just a matter of giving them the resources to put their knowledge into action," says Ramirez, who helped convene the inaugural cohort of LUCHA. "I want to provide [LUCHA] with the resources they need, whether fixing public

lights, fixing the street, or getting trash collection in the neighborhood. Those are on-the-ground works, but that's what's changing things. Aside from the work I do here, I've been lucky enough to work at

the state and federal policy level to change the system, dismantling the system that keeps disenfranchising communities of color—especially low-income communities, which are my communities."

They are also the communities of his LUCHA colleague, LUPE project coordinator Esther Herrera, another formerly undocumented student who qualified for in-state tuition under the DREAM act. She earned a master's degree and is now working on her Ph.D.

As Ramirez and Herrera recall a fellow DREAMer from Mission, Texas, who lost hope he would be able to go to college and took his own life in 2011, Ramirez removes his glasses and wipes his eyes, while Herrera's voice breaks.

"We have to get organized because just like him, there are many other kids," Herrera says. "I knew the struggle of growing up undocumented, so through that, I can relate. I had very good role models, very good counselors growing up who didn't let [documentation] limit me getting the education. We advocate for many issues to ensure everybody has those same opportunities.

"It takes a very special person to do this kind of work—long hours, unstructured work settings—but we do it because we have the heart, because we've suffered just like our members have," Herrera says. "Everybody deserves to live with dignity. Just like people take the time to care about my education and my future, that's why we take the time to care about their future and their kids' future." ■

Catherine Cuellar (@ccuellar) is director of *Entrepreneurs For North Texas* at the *Communities Foundation of Texas* in Dallas.





Wearing the White Hats

Syria Civil Defense workers—the “White Helmets”—haven’t given up on the future of their country.

by **ANNA LEKAS MILLER**

“IF THERE IS A SHELLING, stay away from the windows and crouch next to a sturdy piece of furniture—like a bed or a wardrobe.”

“In the case of a bombing, cover your head with your hands and scream for help.”

Although they read like lines from an emergency-preparedness instruction manual, these are actually from a children’s coloring book. The book follows Mahr, a little boy with big brown eyes and a bowl-shaped haircut, and “Bebo, the Puppy”—a slightly obese, striped orange dog—through a series of emergency situations, the kind that have been all too common in Syria.

“Just fold your hands over your head, like Mahr and Bebo, the Puppy.”

The book is illustrated, written, and distributed by Syria Civil Defense—a group of 2,600 volunteer rescue workers, renowned for saving civilians from explosions and barrel bombings in opposition-controlled Syria. The book is intended to instruct children, in a playful yet serious way, how to act during barrel bombings and shellings, which have become a part of daily life in Syria.

Members of
Syria Civil
Defense aid victims
of barrel bombings
dropped by the
Assad regime on
the city of Aleppo.

Photos courtesy of thesyriacampaign.org





Women are becoming more involved in Syria Civil Defense. At right, a defense worker aids a man injured in a bombing. Far right, educational outreach is an important part of the work of the White Helmets.

Mahr crouches next to a wardrobe during a shelling. After a barrel bombing, Bebo folds his paws over his floppy, cartoonish ears and screams for help. The wardrobe—another character in this *Brave Little Toaster*-like adaptation of a child's perspective of the Syrian civil war—smiles down at both of them.

"Don't worry—the civil defense is on its way."

Although the Syrian revolution began as a nonviolent movement, inspired by the Arab uprisings in 2011, the Assad regime's brutal and almost immediate crackdown on the demonstrations quickly escalated the protests into an armed revolt and, eventually, a civil war. Some protesters began to take up arms in self-defense, joined by defectors from the

It was around this time that James Le Mesurier, then running good governance and democratization workshops in southern Turkey, met a member of Turkey's earthquake response team in a bar. After a short conversation, Le Mesurier wondered whether earthquake response tactics that removed survivors from collapsed buildings could also be used to save people trapped under buildings collapsed from barrel bombs. With international funding allocated for "nonlethal aid" to the Syrian opposition (including more than \$13 million from the U.S. State Department) and nothing to lose, Le Mesurier invited several members of the budding civil defense team in Syria to a pilot program in southern Turkey—a training that applied earthquake rescue tactics to war.

"Our goal was to save as many people as we could in a short amount of time."

regime's army, and later foreign fighters—forming what would become known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), engaging in guerilla-style military tactics to challenge the Assad regime.

Near the end of 2012, the Assad regime pulled out of now opposition-controlled areas, taking with it basic government services—including fire response, civil administration, and schools. Without these institutions in place, and the first lines of the civil war officially drawn, the regime began to attack these areas at will, first showering them with mortar shells and then dropping barrel bombs—previously unseen weapons built from metal barrels filled with explosives, shrapnel, and sometimes gas, then dropped at random from helicopters and airplanes. Throughout the war, such weapons have exploded buildings and leveled neighborhoods, killing civilians either in the initial blast or underneath the remaining rubble.

At first, volunteers would rush out of their homes after each bombing and search for people who were still alive, stuck under the rubble. With no training or equipment, many were killed, often in "double taps," a tactic of the Assad regime that involves waiting 15 minutes after a barrel bombing to drop another, often—perhaps intentionally—killing rescue workers in the process.

The next week, Le Mesurier received a call from one of the members of the Aleppo-based team: "Holy f***! This weekend we saved a husband, a wife, and a baby."

Soon after, a regular training program was implemented—basic rescue training programs were held at the centers in Syria, followed by a more advanced training in Turkey and Jordan. Donor-purchased medical supplies, tools, and other paraphernalia were sent with workers back into Syria. Bullet-hole-ridden empty trucks and buses were reappropriated as ambulances and firetrucks. The signature white helmets, which earned Syria Civil Defense its nickname "the White Helmets" (though white just happened to be the cheapest color), were painted with "al-Defa3 al-Madani," the Arabic phrase for civil defense, and taken across the border.

Beginning in 2013, equipped and in uniform, Syria Civil Defense members were now able to rush to the site of bombings, shouting: "Defa3 al-Madani, hada houn?" ("Civil defense! Anyone here?")

The most dangerous job in the world

Syria Civil Defense now consists of 110 teams across the country and has saved an estimated 22,600 lives. Born from the chaos of the Syrian civil war, one of its first and



most important values was impartiality. Despite the fact that they were based in the opposition-controlled areas, one of their first promises was to save anyone—regardless of their political allegiance. Although most of those in need of rescue are trapped beneath barrel bomb rubble in opposition-controlled areas, Syria Civil Defense workers have also saved people injured by FSA snipers, regardless of whether or not they are aligned with the regime.

“Our goal was to save as many people as we could in a short amount of time,” Gardenia (the preferred pseudonym of one of the founders of Syria Civil Defense) told *Sojourners*. “We don’t care who they are.”

Although the civil defense training and expertise have saved thousands of lives, there are equally as many instances when they are too late, and unable to respond in time, which takes a psychological toll on the workers.

“I have never rescued someone who was still alive; they have all been dead,” Gardenia continued, confessing the more difficult aspects of working as a volunteer medical relief worker inside of Syria. “One time a sniper shot someone who was walking right beside me,” she said. “The whole street was controlled by snipers, and you couldn’t walk from here to there without risking being shot.” Although she checked his vital signs and tried to resuscitate him, it was too late. He had been shot in the heart.

“One day I asked one of my colleagues why you would rush to save someone when you have mortars raining down on you or snipers firing at you,” she continued. He responded, “It is because I cannot think.”

The job itself has claimed the lives of more than 100 rescue workers—often while saving people between bombings. While double-tap bombings used to be a



predictably spaced 15 minutes apart, allowing rescue workers an allotted period of time to save as many people as possible, in recent months these second strikes have been less predictable, which makes a difference in whether or not rescue workers can save lives and be safe while doing it.

“It has been called the most dangerous job in the world,” Le Mesurier said. “No one has challenged that statement.”

“Whoever saves a life ...”

Although the rescue workers have adopted a Quranic sura as their motto—“Whoever saves a life, it will be as if [they have] saved all of humanity”—many are careful to emphasize that it is humanity, not religion, that guides their actions.

“I have asked all of them, when you see a resident sitting there after a bombing, do you rush there because God told you to, or because something inside of you pushed you there?” Ola Suliman, a training coordinator for Mayday Rescue, the organization formed to coordinate disaster-response trainings for Syria Civil Defense, told *Sojourners*. “All of them—all of them—have told me, no, of course not—it’s something inside.”

Reflective of Syrian civil society, most civil defense rescue workers religiously identify as Sunni Muslims—though there is a smattering of Christian, Druze, and other religious minority representation. However,

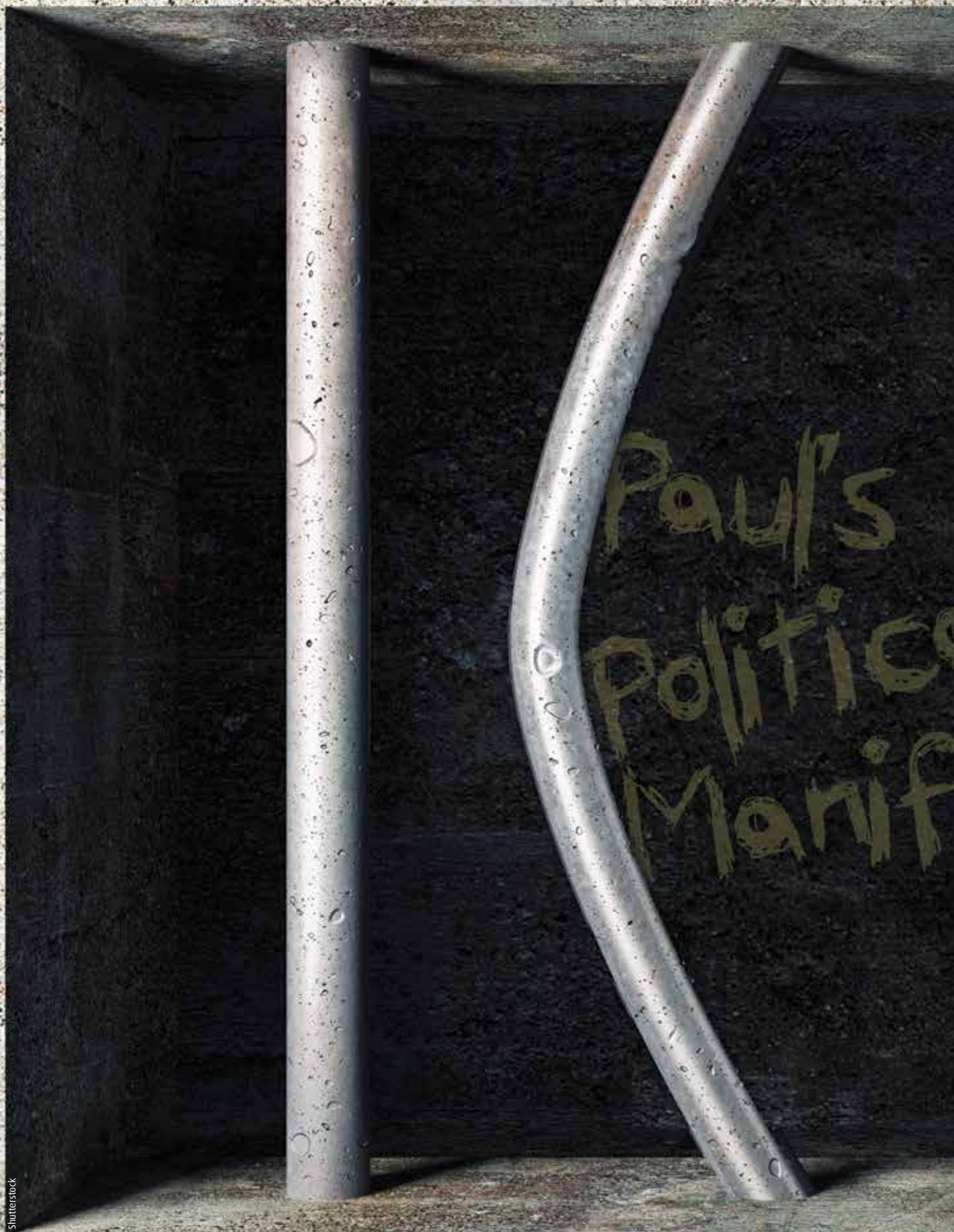
as religious, ethnic, and sectarian divisions have become increasingly politicized during the conflict, many workers are careful to emphasize that religious and political impartiality is more important to their work than is their particular religious affiliation.

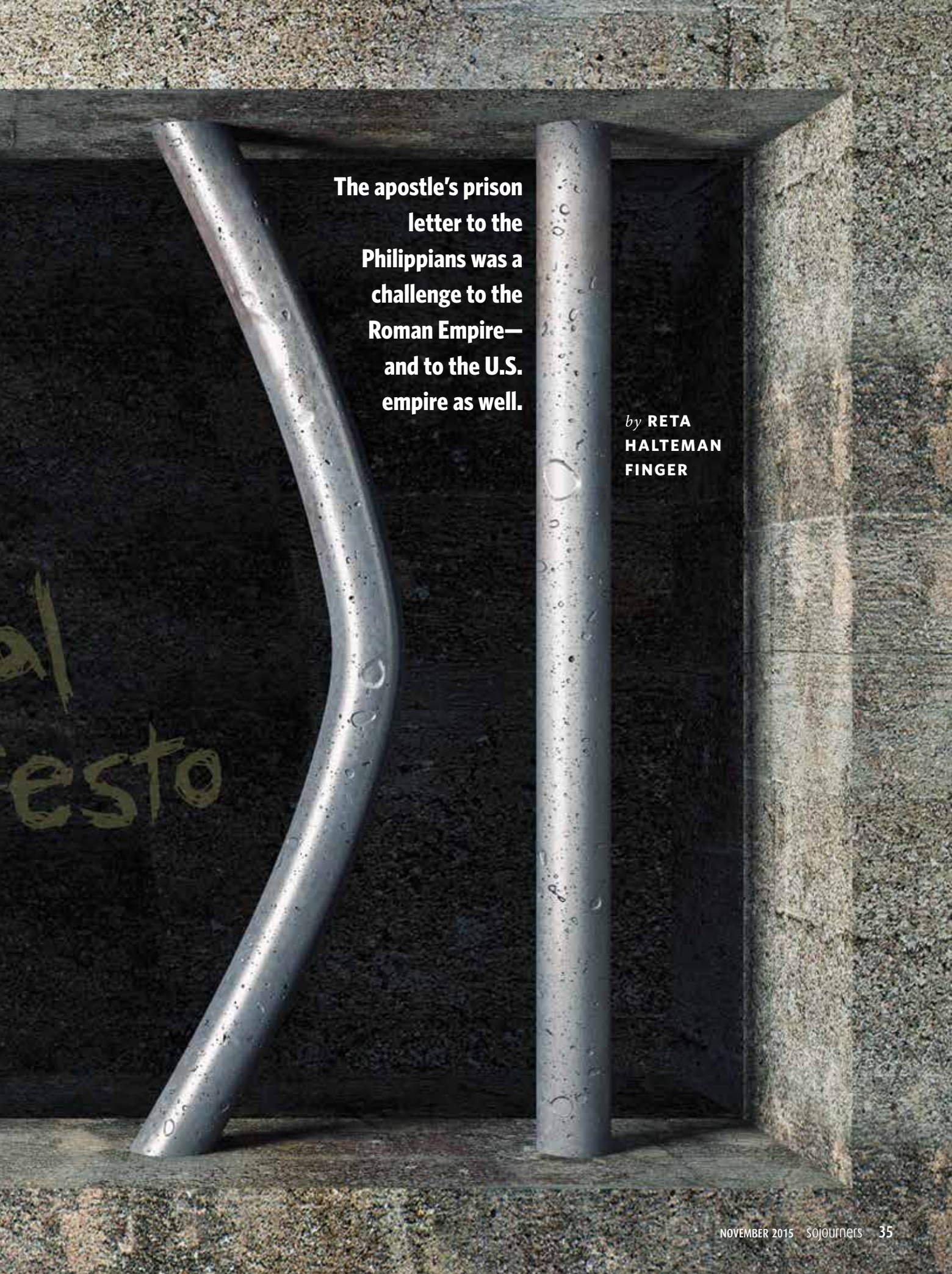
Religion does play a role in the practical sense. Working in more conservative areas of Syria, where women wear traditional dress and do not wish to be handled by male rescue workers—especially when they have been in a private setting and are not properly attired—has created a unique need for female first responders.

“There was a young lady trapped, and she didn’t want a man to come and rescue her because she was not wearing proper clothing, and she was too shy,” Suliman told *Sojourners*, recounting an incident from Idlib, a province in the north. “Her family also would have had a problem with a man coming in to rescue her—it was a conservative community, a small village where everyone knows each other.” Luckily, two recently trained women arrived at the scene to rescue her and take her to the hospital.

“This incident made the community demand more women on the civil defense teams,” Suliman continued. “Women now do the live training, like everyone else—because they might need these skills, like everyone else. In the cases where a woman

Continued on Page 47





The apostle's prison
letter to the
Philippians was a
challenge to the
Roman Empire—
and to the U.S.
empire as well.

by **RETA
HALTEMAN
FINGER**

Paul's activism was perceived by political authorities

"REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS." "Do not worry about anything." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Verse fragments such as these, in the midst of a warm, fuzzy letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the house churches in Philippi, sustained me through high school and beyond. Indeed, the entire letter is saturated with joy. Philippians has been a source of great comfort to many Christians over the centuries.

It is clear that Paul had a close friendship with the believers in Philippi. A major purpose of the letter was to thank them for sending one of their own, Epaphroditus, with a gift for Paul. Sadly, the messenger became very ill while with Paul, but now that he has recovered, Paul is returning him to Philippi, along with the letter (2:25-30; 4:15-18).

Less clear are the political assumptions and harsh realities that frame this encouraging missive. Paul lived and traveled within the mightiest empire the world had known up to that point. He carried his gospel message thousands of miles on Roman roads built for military conquest. At the same time he challenged the very foundations that supported this empire, and his activism was perceived by political authorities as a threat. Paul paid for this by suffering in a Roman prison (1:13) and did not know if he would survive his ordeal or not (1:21-24).

Stuff that happened earlier

Around 50 C.E., Paul and his companions were on a missionary journey through Asia Minor, what is now western Turkey. At Troas, Paul received a night vision of a person from Macedonia, a region now part of Greece, begging him to "come and help us" (Acts 16:9). The little group immediately set sail across the Aegean Sea to the port of Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, "a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony" (Acts 16:12).

Note the term "Roman colony." This was no ordinary city, but one that had been successively colonized by the Athenians, then the Macedonians, and now the Romans. Octavian (later called Augustus Caesar) had settled there a number of veterans from his military campaigns nearly a century earlier. As a colonial city, Philippi was given the rights of *Ius Italicum*, the same rights as major cities in Italy. This included freedom from direct taxation and full citizenship for elite, Latin-speaking Romans. Under their thumbs, however, a culturally mixed population of noncitizen Greeks, Thracians (ancestors of modern Bulgarians), and other immigrants subsisted. Thus the house churches Paul planted at Philippi would probably have included some higher-ranking Roman citizens (including women) along with lower-class clients, servants, and slaves (see Acts 16:15).

Paul's first prison experience that we know of took place in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40), but it was short-lived, and he moved on to other cities in the Greek provinces of Macedonia and Achaia—and finally back across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus in Asia Minor.

Imprisoned by the empire

Although Acts never records an incarceration of Paul in Ephesus, this is geographically the most likely place from which he wrote to the Philippians. The letter was traditionally thought to have been from Rome because of the reference in 1:13 to the "imperial guard" and because we know Paul was imprisoned in Rome. But Rome was too far away, considering the letters carried to and fro and the visit from Epaphroditus. (In addition, we now know the imperial Roman guard existed in various major cities of the Empire.) According to Acts 19, Paul got himself into enough political trouble at Ephesus that a stint in prison there is not at all unlikely.

Because Paul's letter sounds so joyful, it is hard to imagine the conditions he was living under. Even today, in the nation with the highest incarceration rates in the world, most Americans know little of the daily routine of prison life. But examples abound of abusive conditions in U.S. prisons: For example, a recent letter from 20 women at the Middle River Regional Jail in Verona, Va., to the Virginia Department of Corrections highlighted, among many complaints, inadequate medication for diabetic and mentally ill prisoners, as well as a lack of sanitary products. In the June 2015 newsletter of the Open Door Community in Atlanta, a prisoner on death row for 20 years cited increasingly poor food quality, and inadequate amounts as well. "One chicken with rice will feed 20, but where is the chicken? We get bones and skin to make up for the meat."

Prisons in the Roman Empire, however, were not meant for lengthy incarcerations. Conditions were so inhumane that no one could have survived for long. Rather, these dungeons served as holding pens until prisoners were sentenced—either to freedom or execution. Knowing this, Paul debated with himself in 1:19-24 whether living or dying would be better.

In his book *Paul in Roman Custody*, Brian Rapske describes prison conditions almost impossible for us to imagine: perpetual darkness; overcrowding and lack of sanitation with bad air and overpowering smells; heavy chains that rust on sweaty limbs and create deep sores; insufficient food (about 14 ounces of bread and a half-pint of water per day); no bedding except for the prisoner's cloak worn through the day; no water for bathing or washing clothes; no haircuts. Without friends bringing food and other necessities, a person would soon die or go insane living in this hell.

Given these prison conditions, the gift Epaphroditus brought from Philippi was likely not simply a thoughtful present but a matter of life and death for Paul. He probably brought Paul necessities such as food, a clean cloak, scissors for cutting his hair, a wash basin, and companionship and encouragement from his friends in Philippi. We can also understand how Epaphroditus' health broke down during his visits to the disease- and rat-infested dungeons of Ephesus (2:26-27).

How could any letter have been written under such conditions, let alone such a cheerful missive? There may be a clue

as a threat.

in 1:13 where Paul's guards apparently were aware that he was not there for criminal behavior and may have allowed periods of time in daylight where he and Epaphroditus could work together on his letter. Paul evidently did not have a scribal hand (see Galatians 6:11), so he would have dictated this letter to his companion.

These intermittent periods of writing may explain various breaks in the letter, such as 3:1 and 4:8 where Paul used "finally" but then continued anyway. Though some have proposed that Philippians is a composite of several letters, most scholars today assume the unity of the letter because of its recurring themes. Under such difficult prison conditions, it is unrealistic to assume this letter was written at one sitting.

Not just "believers," but "loyalists"

No one is more aware of a clash between worldviews than a political prisoner. Paul was incarcerated because he proclaimed an alternate lord to the Lord Caesar. In a world where religion supported the political aims of those in power, Roman religion honored its gods and freely absorbed the deities of other nations it conquered. Temples, images, and political proclamations were ubiquitous and served to bolster the empire. Each Caesar in turn was a "son of god" who was received among the immortal gods upon his death. Inhabitants of Rome's empire were free to worship whatever gods they desired, so long as such loyalty did not conflict with one's outward allegiance to the empire and its goals.

Jews were the one monotheistic people that Rome alternately persecuted and tolerated—so long as they did not make political waves. But Paul is an apocalyptic Jew who could not keep quiet. He presented the Jewish Jesus as superior to Caesar—the Messiah and Lord who is son of the true God to whom ultimately "every knee should bend" (2:10). In every major city of the empire, Paul planted and nurtured little assemblies of people to whom he taught an alternate worldview. We usually call them "believers," but Gordon Zerbe, in his book *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics*, prefers the term "loyalist." The term implies not just verbal assent but the practice of an alternate way of life by adopting the same self-emptying "mind ... that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5-7).

Paul's subversive politics

Three texts in Philippians specifically highlight Paul's politics, although both the NRSV and NIV downplay their subversive nature. In 1:27, the NRSV says, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." But the Greek imperative for "live your life" is *politeuesthe*. Zerbe observes that each Greek word in this exhortation is politically loaded, so he translates it as, "Singularly, be a citizen body and practice your citizenship in a manner worthy of the good tidings of Messiah." In contrast to Caesar's gospel proclaimed through statue, temple, inscription, and sword, the Messiah's gospel calls for a radically

different lifestyle of self-emptying of privilege.

This is further explained in 2:6-11, where Paul quotes an early "Christ hymn" that he did not write but has adapted to the political situation in Philippi. This hymn is often seen as an early statement supporting Jesus' divinity in the trinitarian and Christological debates of later centuries, but that is not its purpose here. In 2:5-6, the NRSV misses the point where it says that "Christ Jesus ... was in the form of God." Rather, Paul compares Jesus to the Roman declaration that Caesar was "in the form of a god." Though Jesus was also "in the form of a god," he refused divine honors and instead took the form of a human slave and humbled himself even to death on a Roman cross (2:7-8). What can be more countercultural than that!

This Christ-hymn carried special significance in Philippi where the elite, Latin-speaking Romans boasted of their Italian citizenship. For any belonging to the Jesus-assemblies, following a leader who became a slave would be a bitter pill to swallow. It would have meant relating to their own slaves as equals.

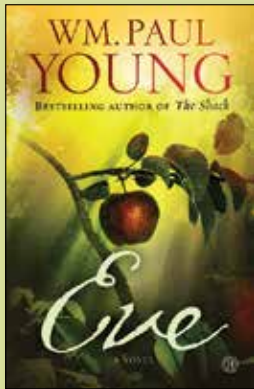
The third text is 3:20: "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek term is *politeuma*, meaning "place of citizenship." We hold our proof of citizenship in heaven, and it is from there that we expect our savior. These terms are highly political and subversive. On many carved plaques throughout the empire, Augustus Caesar had been hailed as savior and lord. Note further that the true Savior and Lord comes from heaven to earth. The implication, spelled out in 2:9-11, is that ultimately Jesus will be Lord of every nation, including the Roman Empire. Whatever interim obedience Jesus-loyalists give to Rome, it is always subject to the higher authority of the coming Lord Jesus.

Paul's contentment under miserable prison conditions (4:11-13) and his repeated calls to rejoice are indeed ironic, but they are the consistent result of one who takes the long view. Rome may not fall in a day or a century. American empire may not fail in a generation or two. But Paul's view of Jesus' eventual political triumph on earth enables him to "pray with joy" (1:3) for every loyalist Philippian who will receive his letter.

America today, though in the guise of a democracy, has become an empire through its vast military involvement and multinational corporations. Those who hold a "god-and-country" theology identify the United States as especially chosen by God to fight the forces of evil in the world. They miss the many ways the U.S. operates in the interests of its elite power brokers. Rome also publicized itself as "savior of the world." But Paul's prison letter to the Philippians challenges both empires. Let's keep reading it as a political manifesto of a radically alternate lifestyle. ■

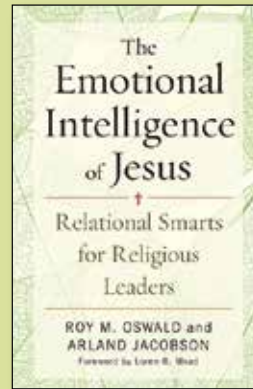
Reta Halteman Finger, co-author of *Creating a Scene in Corinth: A Simulation, taught Bible at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., and writes a Bible study blog at www.eewc.com/RetasReflections.*

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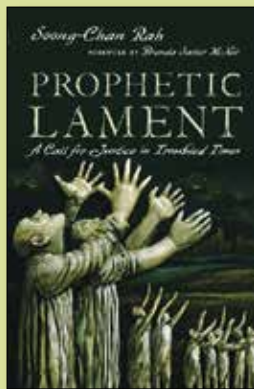
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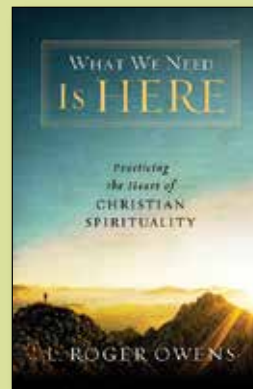
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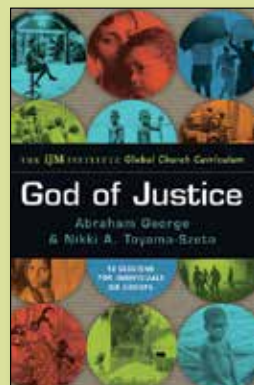
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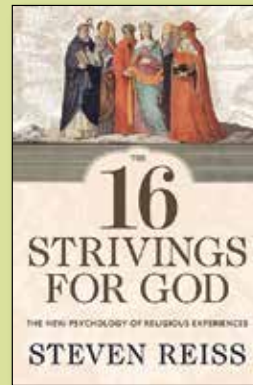
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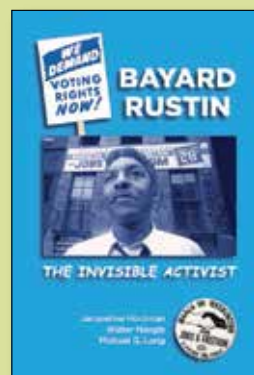
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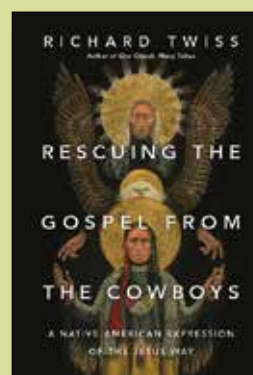
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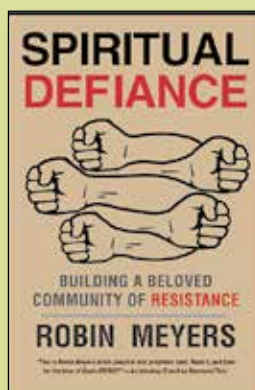
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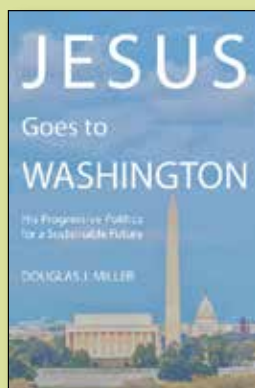
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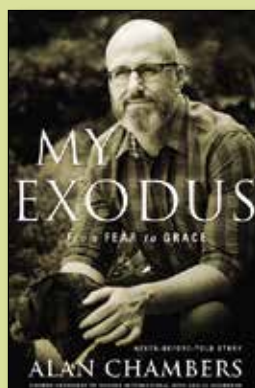
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Robin Meyers
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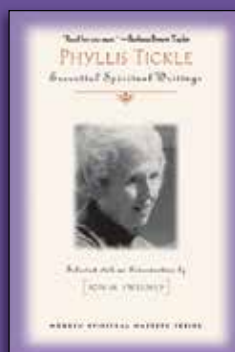
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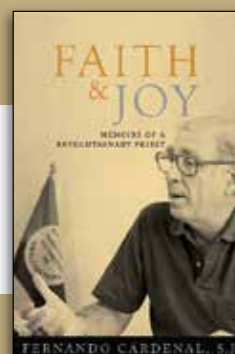
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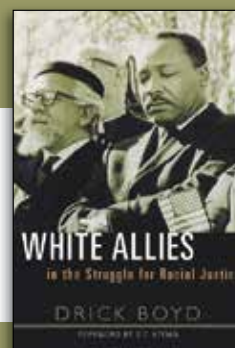
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Detail from "Where am I?
Who am I? Why am I?"
by William Kurelek

By Julie Polter

The Hide-and-Seek of Faith

New books pursue big questions and elusive answers.

CANADIAN ARTIST William Kurelek was influenced both by his experiences with mental illness and his conversion to Catholicism. He would eventually be considered psychiatrically recovered, but he was institutionalized as a young man in the mid-'50s, during which he created one of his best known early paintings, showing a blind man wandering in a desert, captioned "Where am I? Who am I? Why am I?"

These are foundational questions for all of us, not just a gifted artist in a time of suffering. The institutional church tends to assert that the answers to such questions are, if not simple, at least imminently knowable: Just pull up a pew and stay awhile. Many of us who are already believers come to assume that our job is to have a spiritual GPS always on, ready to point others in the "right" direction.

But of course, finding God or our place in the universe has rarely been that easy. Church may or may not be the place where we who are lost are found. The person we've

self-understanding and shake even our deepest beliefs.

In her best-selling 2013 spiritual memoir, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, Nadia Bolz-Weber described her journey from fundamentalist childhood to alcoholic rebel to believer with a priestly call. A tattooed, weight-lifting former standup comedian who is now a Lutheran (ELCA) pastor, Bolz-Weber helped found House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, which combines ancient liturgy and theological orthodoxy with artistic expression, social justice, and radical inclusion.

Bolz-Weber's new book, **Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People** (Convergent Books), delves further into her experiences as a pastor. Through stories of parishioners, friends, and people she wishes she didn't have to deal with (who are sometimes one and the same), Bolz-Weber testifies to the presence of God in the unlikeliest of human vessels, including herself. This is integral to the book's theme—that God is

on the move in the world, just not always or even usually where our Christian cultural assumptions tell us to look, and grace is real. *Accidental Saints* is elevated by Bolz-Weber's skilled story-

teaching, characterized by both theological insight and a comic's timing. Like other pastor-writers before her, she reflects on personal encounters, church services, and scriptures, but unlike many, she usually dodges the all-too-common pitfall of spiritual sentimentality.

Heidi B. Neumark is also a Lutheran pastor and gifted writer; her award-winning 2003 book *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* drew on her nearly 20 years of shepherding a congregation in an urban community racked by poverty, violence, and systemic injustice.

Neumark delves into a very different topic in her new book, **Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith** (Abingdon

Continued on Page 43

New & Noteworthy



RADICAL HISTORY

Through recent testimonials and historical footage, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, a film by documentarian Stanley Nelson, brings fresh insight on the cultural and political influence of the young men and women who proclaimed 50 years ago that black lives matter. Firelight Films

HEAR THEIR CRIES

God of Justice: The IJM Institute Global Church Curriculum, by Abraham George and Nikki A. Toyama-Szeto, is a 12-session Bible study on the centrality of God's concern for the poor and the oppressed. It is rooted in the human rights work of the International Justice Mission. IVP Connect

CHANGE IS GONNA COME

Inspired by Naomi Klein's best-seller of the same name, the film *This Changes Everything* challenges viewers to "change or be changed" during the climate crisis. Through visual narratives of communities around the world, director Avi Lewis inspires a transformation of economics as well as climate practices. thischangeseverything.org

FAITH AND CONSCIENCE

The documentary film *The Armor of Light* follows politically conservative evangelical pastor Rob Schenck and Lucy McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, an unarmed teenager who was shot and killed in Florida, as they find common cause in offering a moral challenge to America's gun culture. armoroflightfilm.com

Bolz-Weber testifies to the presence of God in the unlikeliest of human vessels, including herself.

always claimed to be may be shattered by unexpected events or discoveries. Or theologies that we once took for granted may come to ring hollow. As Diana Butler Bass writes in her new book, **Grounded: Finding God in the World**, "millions of people are navigating the space between the secular world and conventional theism. They are making a path between the two that nevertheless embraces both, finding a God who is a 'gracious mystery, ever greater, ever nearer' through a new awareness of the earth and in the lives of their neighbors." (See more from *Grounded* on p. 45.)

Several other very distinct books released this year wrestle with the shape of faith, finding or naming God, and how secrets revealed can shift our

Elegant Beats

AS KIDS, Wilner Baptiste (viola) and Kevin Sylvester (violin) might have been labeled classical music nerds. They played in the orchestra at their Fort Lauderdale, Fla. performing arts high school and went to college on full music scholarships. They have excelled in an insular and rarified world: one in which people devote hours every day to mastering the subtleties of antique and unforgiving instruments and the difficult repertoire left by the dead white guys. It's a sphere peopled almost entirely by whites and Asians, and Baptiste and Sylvester are neither.

"Wil B" Baptiste and "Kev Marcus" Sylvester are Black Violin, a duo that fuses the thrilling virtuosity of the European classical world with the booty-shaking funk and street-level grace of hip-hop. In September they released their first major-label album, *Stereotypes*.

While these two young men were honing their chops in that high school orchestra, they were also typical turn-of-the-century hip-hop

Black Violin fuses the virtuosity of the classical world with the funk and street-level grace of hip-hop.

kids, tuned into the world of rap. After graduating from different colleges, the two got back together and worked the South Florida clubs, developing an act that involved playing classical-string covers of hip-hop hits.

I know, this whole hip-hop and classical thing sounds like a gimmick, and if I'd read about it before I heard these guys, I probably wouldn't have been interested. It sounds too much like the prog-rock abominations of the 1970s, when rock operas and rock symphonies almost killed off rock and roll. But I was lucky enough to hear Black Violin



live before I ever read about them. They were playing at a banquet honoring top academic achievers from historically black colleges and universities. It was the perfect pairing of artist and audience. Taking the stage backed by a live drummer and a deejay, Black Violin rocked the house with sophisticated sparkle.

After that, I looked for more online. The first thing I found was their funkied-up adaptation of one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. Then I stumbled into their cover of Bruno Mars' "Locked Out of Heaven," and I was sold. These are gentlemen who know that all true art, from whatever century, speaks from and to the universal core of the human heart.

Black Violin sent a tape to *Showtime at the Apollo*, and in 2005 they took the top honors. Since then there have been two self-released albums and a grueling schedule of up to 200 live performances per year. Often they play in schools by day, promoting music education, and then again in a club or concert hall at night. But, not surprisingly, it's taken 10 years for anyone in the music business to figure out what to do with them.

Stereotypes is produced

by Eli Wolf, who has worked with such American treasures as Willie Nelson, Wynton Marsalis, and jazz singer Cassandra Wilson. Wolf hooked Black Violin up with guest rappers Pharoahe Monch and Black Thought of The Roots and pianist and singer Kandace Springs. The title track features spoken words, drifting in and out of the mix, on preconceptions, race-based and otherwise, about people and their cultures. The rest of the record puts that simple idea into practice with original tunes blending hip-hop and R&B grooves with soaring string adventures. There are also two covers. One, "Shaker," is a Black Violin-ized interpretation of the "Simple Gifts" melody from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. The other is an instrumental rendering of "Walk on By" that recalls the Isaac Hayes version more than Dionne Warwick's.

Black Violin appeals to the mind, the spirit, and the body. They are still on the road year-round, so they are bound to be near you eventually. Check them out. ■



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

Continued from Page 41

Press). Long after her father's death, she discovers that her father, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1938, had hidden his Jewish heritage. She did not know that her well-off paternal grandparents were deported in 1943 from Germany to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic, having given money to the Nazi government for what they thought was living space in a comfortable old-age home. Only her grandmother survived the ordeal.

As Neumark plunges into historical research, she finds herself facing religious resonance and dissonance. The Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) seems to her like an ancestral root to a lifetime of pastoral and organizing work. But Neumark must also struggle with how the Lutheran tradition in which she was raised and ordained contains deadly strands of anti-Semitism. Although very aware that Christian theology has long been twisted to endorse persecution of the Jewish people, it was an especially painful jolt to examine more deeply, for example, how the sacraments she loves were sometimes used as weapons of forced assimilation.

This moving book explores the power of family secrets and the power of bringing them to light, woven together with history, biblical insights, and the relevance of the past to contemporary justice issues.

When Leah Gunning Francis, an assistant professor of Christian education and associate dean of contextual education at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, saw the TV news the day Michael Brown was shot in nearby Ferguson, she knew nothing would ever be the same for her city. Soon she realized that her faith and vocation would also be forever changed. In **Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community** (Chalice Press), Gunning Francis frames interviews she conducted with area clergy and with some of the youth leaders who initiated and have sustained the organizing in Ferguson. Some of the clergy had never participated in street actions before, and few were used to taking their cues from non-church-going young people. But over the course of months, many religious leaders found new facets of their vocation—learning to follow the lead of the organizers and leveraging their status or resources on the



From *Mad Max: Fury Road*

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

MY FRIEND the architect Colin Wishart says that the purpose of his craft is to help people live better. Just imagine if every public building, city park, urban transportation hub, and home were constructed with the flourishing of humanity—in community or solitude—in mind. We might be inspired to create new, hopeful thoughts, friendships with strangers, or projects that bring transformation into the lives of others.

It is easy to spot architecture divorced from its highest purpose. In a building or other space made to function purely within the bounds of current economic mythology—especially those created to house the so-called “making” of money—the color of hope only rarely reveals itself. Instead we are touched by melancholy, weighed down by drudgery, compelled by the urge to get away. But when we see a space whose stewards seem to have known that human kindness, poetry, and breathing are more important than the “free” market, we realize that it is possible to be always, everywhere, coming home. Think of a concert hall designed for the purest acoustics, a playground where the toys blend in with the trees, a train station where the transition from one place and way of being to another has been honored as a spiritual act.

This is true for all art, not just

architecture. So when called to speak to the well-worn question of the greatest movies ever made, instead of “greatest,” what about “most humane” or “transformative” or “courageous”? What about “films that made me laugh to the point of tears as I felt more part of the human race” or “films that led to healing social change” or “films that made me want to grow up”?

Some may say that this fails to account for the aesthetics and technical craft of filmmaking. For me, it's simple: The purpose of cinema—as an art form, and as a communal and individual experience—is to help us live better. The best films help us understand more of who we are and how to transcend our brokenness without excluding our shadows.

The greatest recent films—including **Listen to Me Marlon, Mad Max: Fury Road, Shaun the Sheep, Clouds of Sils Maria, Love & Mercy, Leviathan, The Salt of the Earth, Mr. Turner, and Inside Out**—are what results when humane wisdom and grace infuse technical and aesthetic craft operating at their highest frequencies. Artists need our support to keep making them. ■

Gareth Higgins (garethhiggins.net) is a northern Irish writer based in North Carolina.



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organizers' behalf when possible, staying in the streets even when some congregations grumbled, providing pastoral care in new and humble ways, and finding a new way of being church on the streets without stumbling over doctrinal beliefs (or unbelief).

As one organizer, Millennial Activists United cofounder Brittany Ferrell, described it: "I feel like there's this perpetuated idea that 'church' is something you go to, and it's been proven wrong within the last six months, because church has come to us whether we welcomed it or not." David Gerth, executive director of an interfaith organizing coalition, had a similar revelation from the clergy side when watching the protesters early on. "[T]he image for me is that their feet drilled into the core of the earth and they were pulling out raw magma. ... it's just this level of power. And I know that's not exactly a theological image, but, for me, then I recognized, 'The spirit of God is in this place. Whether they're claiming it or not, I'm claiming it.'"

Ferguson and Faith is a firsthand account of one of the most important currents in U.S. society right now, an informal handbook for clergy who want to take action, and a powerful antidote to mainstream media stories and images that continue to ignore the commitment, intelligence, strategy, and integrity of the young people organizing for long-denied justice.

When best-selling author and popular blogger Rachel Held Evans released her book **Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church** (Thomas Nelson) last spring, some took the book as final confirmation that she is an apostate, a traitor to her evangelical heritage. It is, after all, organized according to the seven sacraments, and ends with how she and her husband have ended up finding a home in the Episcopal church. (Although her open and affirming stance toward LGBTQ people is probably the real kicker.) For others—evangelicals who share her theological and social concerns, or who also love the sacraments—she's simply a very good writer who reflects and reports from a position of open-hearted orthodoxy.

For Held Evans, different churches have been a mix of loving community and doctrinal frustration, idealistic dreams and disappointing realities. This is a journey that many readers, from a variety of upbringings,



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can relate to. But her self-awareness and faith in a bigger picture are hopeful. She writes, “Sometimes I wonder how much I’ve missed because I haven’t bothered to look, because I wrote off that church or that person or that denomination because I assumed God to be absent when there is not a corner of this world that God has abandoned.”

Finally, in **Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God** (HarperOne), Lauren F. Winner, an author and Episcopal priest, invites readers to move beyond the greatest hits of biblical metaphors for God. Winner’s prose is both lyrical and learned, seamlessly blending Christian tradition, scriptural interpretation, social history, and personal experiences (from a sweet country altar to a women’s prison) with touches of humor: “In calling Himself ‘the bread of life’—and not, say, crème caramel or caviar—Jesus is identifying with basic food, with sustenance. ... No one holds caviar riots; people riot for bread.”

These meditations on smell, laughter, and other metaphors and images for God aren’t mere linguistic doodling: As Winner notes, how we name or imagine God affects everything from our mental health to society and politics to, of course, our spirituality. When God seems most distant or abstract, it might be time to follow laughter to a new understanding of divine subversion. ■

Julie Polter is a senior associate editor of *Sojourners*.

2015 Books

INSPIRING PAGES

New (and newish) books to challenge, teach, and encourage.

BY NOW you’ve probably heard of a little book of hard analysis and eloquent perspective that came out this summer, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau) by Ta-Nehisi Coates. (If not, get thee to a book store or library.) Here are some other books—some out this fall, others from earlier in 2015—that you’ll want to know about.

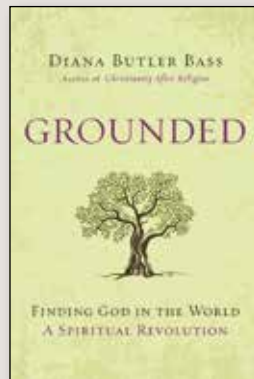
Fresh This Fall

With *Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People’s Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle*

Continued on Page 46

A HORIZONTAL VIEW

JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY urge followers to seek heavenly things, to model their lives on heavenly virtues, and to have hope in heaven. In the New Testament, heaven most often appears as the “kingdom of heaven,” God’s political and social vision for humanity, an idea that Jesus uses to criticize the Roman Empire’s oppressive domination system. Jesus’s own



prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), seeks to align earthly ethics with the divine order of God’s own dwelling place. Heaven is an intrusive reality, the ever present realm of God hovering all around, sometimes even synonymous with God, as Marcus Borg writes. The Bible says the kingdom of heaven “has come near” (Matthew 4:17), and if heaven is nearby, so is God. Heaven is here-and-now, not there-and-then.

To speak of heaven, therefore, is another way to speak of the earth. But the vision for the earth that “heaven” presents is not in keeping with the

world’s violence, oppression, and injustice; rather, it is an alternate vision of peace, blessing, and abundance, the world as God intended it to be. Heaven has been depicted as far away, unattainable in this life.

If you think about it, however, heaven is not far away at all. We may walk on the ground, but the rest of our bodies move through the sky all the time—the troposphere, the layer of the atmosphere that extends upward from the earth’s surface to about 35,000 feet. The sky begins at our feet. Thus, we actually live in the heavens now, in the space in which earth and sky meet. God’s “heavenly” presence is with us now.

Heaven is not far away at all.

Some people might worry about losing a sense of the mysterious and transcendent aspects of God by making the divine presence too immanent, overly identified with the world (and sky) around us. There is a point to be made here, one even understood by the most passionate mystics. God is not completely accessible to us.

To say that God is the air we breathe in the sky that surrounds us does not negate the mystery of God. There is another location where earth and sky touch: at the horizon. Physicists talk about a “cosmic horizon,” the edge of the universe past what we see. Horizons retain an aspect of mystery, even a sort of transcendence. They are never quite where they once were; they always shift. To speak of God and sky is to speak of intimacy, but it also hints at a different sort of distance as well—not like God sitting far above the world, but perhaps more like God at the horizon. Just beyond what we can see, there is more. Not God above, but God at the edge, the edge of the visible world, the horizon of mystery. ■

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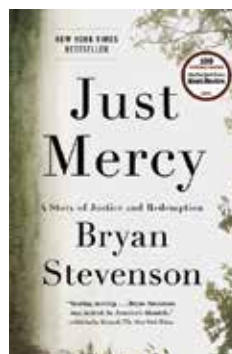
of *Our Time* (The New Press), **James Kilgore** has written an accessible field guide to an urgent topic. **Geraldine Brooks** gives King David the novel treatment in *The Secret Chord* (Viking). **Aviya Kushner** plumbs translation in *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible* (Spiegel & Grau). **Kathryn J. Edin** and **H. Luke Shaefer** profile families enduring poverty in *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith* (Oxford) is **Robert Wuthnow's** case for why sometimes data is dubious.

In the children's picture book *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (Dial), **Edwidge Danticat** tells the stories of many through one little girl. **Sarah Bessey** tells us to be not afraid of questions in *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith* (Howard Books). Women write their truth in *Faithfully Feminist: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Feminists*

on *Why We Stay* (part of the *I Speak for Myself* series), edited by **Gina Messina-Dysert**, **Jennifer Zobair**, and **Amy Levin**.

Earlier This Year

Editors **adrienne maree brown** and **Walidah Imarisha** invite us to envision new worlds with *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (AK Press). **Jimmy Carter** shares an abundance of wisdom in *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety* (Simon & Schuster). **Leonardo Boff** summons sacred power in *Come, Holy Spirit: Inner Fire, Giver of Life, and Comforter of the Poor* (Orbis). In the young adult novel *Conviction* (Hyperion), by **Kelly Loy Gilbert**, a teenage boy negotiates a dramatic tangle of faith, family, and loyalty. Citizen of the Choctaw Nation and Episcopal priest **Steven Charleston** describes *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (Morehouse). **Margaret Regan** reports on



the *Detained and Deported: Stories of Immigrant Families Under Fire* (Beacon).

Jon M. Sweeney edited and introduces *Phyllis Tickle: Essential Spiritual Writings* (Orbis). **Martha Spang** edited a book whose title says it all: *There's a Woman in the Pulpit: Christian Clergywomen Share Their Hard Days, Holy*

Moments, and the Healing Power of Humor (Christian Journeys). **Stanley Hauerwas** offers an atypical "how to" book with *The Work of Theology* (Eerdmans). **Kelly Brown Douglas** delves into history, theology, and culture in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis). Finally, **Bryan Stevenson's** *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Spiegel & Grau), first released in 2014, came out in paperback this summer: A both devastating and cautiously hopeful narrative from a veteran lawyer who has made justice for the least and left out his life's work. —**Julie Polter**

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White Helmets

Continued from Page 33

needs to be rescued, they are also the first ones who are called.”

Although only 65 members of 2,600-member Syria Civil Defense are women, they train and work alongside male rescue workers, often responding to the same emergencies. Institutions such as Syria Civil Defense and the demand for increased medical workers have created space for women to be active in civil society, training and organizing civilians to respond to medical emergencies.

“As a woman, what are you going to do?” Gardenia said. “You can’t pick up a weapon and go fight; this is even difficult for a man.” For this reason, Gardenia encourages women to involve themselves in civil society initiatives, like civil defense.

“For the women who have the courage, I always say to go to the civil defense and work with them,” Gardenia said. “I encourage them because this is the only way to help end this conflict. The international community sees Syria as ISIS, the Islamic State, and al-Nusra [a branch of al Qaeda operating in Syria], but no. The civil defense shows that there are a lot of people here helping, working in ways that people aren’t talking about.”

For many, Syria Civil Defense is a symbol of the humanity—and a very active civil society—that is often absent from media coverage of the Syrian civil war. “When I met these workers, they took me back to the original Syrian community,” Suliman said. “They gave me hope again in the Syrian people; they gave me hope that the Syrian people just want to live.”

Though frequently commended for their heroism, civil defense workers such as Gardenia hope that the dramatic actions the rescue workers are famous for—such as saving civilians trapped underneath the rubble of war and resuscitating people immediately after explosions—are only a temporary job description.

“I wish that this would stop—that the barrel bombs will stop and there will be a ceasefire,” she said. “I hope that someday the civil defenders will *not* be working in wars or revolutions, but that they will rebuild Syria.”

On the last page of the coloring book, there is a blank page—except for a line of pink Arabic writing at the top that simply reads: “Draw your vision for the future of Syria.” ■

Anna Lekas Miller is an independent journalist based in Beirut, Lebanon.

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Weeping and Waiting

ADVENT IS QUICKLY APPROACHING as Pentecost draws to a close. The sweeping, turbulent flow of the Spirit's work in the church slows down. These weeks are marked by attention to widows, pain, and relationships, and to the up-close, daily grind of life. We zoom in. No sweeping theological treatises here, except those that alert us that Jesus' second coming embodies all that the world needs to be made right and whole. Pastoral care is the emphasis now. Brush off the dust from your toolbox of "reflective listening," "productive questions," and "fogging." This means no sharp dichotomies between what we do in worship and what we do throughout the week. Pastoral. Prophetic. Administrative. These will need to be one hat, as they always should be.

Scripture reminds us these weeks that our preaching ought always to be about care, about counsel, about presence. Why? Because, after all, we preach to people, not aliens. The goal of preaching is incarnation—the kind that enters the world through a teenage, unwed, poor woman's womb, into a pig trough with animals and outdoor smells. The church's message will need to be no less earthy, involved, reaching the ground of people's *actual* lives. We'll need to speak to all of the contradiction, heartache, and tears along with the opportunities, transitions, and celebrations in folks' lives. I pray that our messages take on flesh. O come, O come, Emmanuel!



Brandon Wrencher is pastor of Blackburns' Chapel United Methodist Church and director of The Blackburn House in Todd, N.C.

[NOVEMBER 1]

Is Your Jesus a Superman?

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

IN JOHN 11, Mary cries over Lazarus' death. Later we find Mary Magdalene crying over the dead body of Jesus (John 20:11). Their tears signal the human condition. That they are women is no accident. Scripture puts to the fore those whose tears are trivialized by the status quo.

In Richard Mouw's *When the Kings Come Marching In*, a reflection on Isaiah 60, he

"Jesus wept" is the scandal of our God.

writes that the most soul-wrenching encounter that happens on the streets of the Holy City "is the encounter between oppressed Christians and their Christian oppressors. ... [T]he sins that have been committed in political history will be publicly exposed in the Holy City. ... [There will be] no simple reversal in the transformed City. No attempt will be made to satisfy our more primitive yearnings for 'revenge.' The goal ... will be the glorification of God, the universal recognition that the Lord alone is righteous ... and swift to do justice."

The political kingdoms of this world glamorize muscle and power. There's little room for tears. Only divide and conquer. That "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) is the scandal of our God, a symbol of God's weakness and limits. Yet these two words are some of the most powerful in scripture. In the Holy City where Jesus is king, tears take on a new meaning. They constitute a political reality that flies in the face of the rigidity of worldly power: the politics of solidarity, of identifica-

tion. Jesus identifies with Mary. Behold our crying, feminine God.

And so the widespread numbness and distance from the tears of black mothers crying over their sons and daughters slain at the hands of police betrays any claims of this country's decency. It exposes the Jesus that many worship on Sunday mornings in American churches as a "superman." But this is not Jesus, not the one who weeps.

There is only one Jesus. He's wailing #BlackLivesMatter alongside the black women leading a movement for our world

to pay attention to their tears. Jesus certainly does, in this life and the next. He promises to wipe every tear from their eyes within a new creation constituted by justice *and* forgiveness, where there is still opportunity for enemies to be made friends.

[NOVEMBER 8]

What's Jesus Worth?

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 146;
Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

NAOMI AND her family had the good life. They left behind want in Judah and gained prosperity in Moab. Her life turns for the worst with the death of her husband and sons. Naomi returns to lack. She is depressed and bitter. God is almost entirely silent and distant and seemingly absent in Naomi's story. God appears completely unreliable and punitive.

And yet God's covenant and faithfulness to Naomi are embodied in Ruth. Naomi cannot see this at first. Ruth is a Moabite, not an Israelite. Ruth is a woman, not a man. Ruth is poor, not wealthy. To receive God through Ruth necessitates breaking Naomi's steeped social and religious conventions. Even before the birth of Obed, who can forget Ruth's impassioned plea of social and religious solidarity to Naomi, "wherever you go, I shall go" (Ruth 1:16-17)? This was none other than the tangible expression of God's love toward Naomi at this tragic time in her life.

Do we have eyes to turn to God's word embodied in strange and surprising places and people? If we confuse Jesus with silver and gold, he'll never be enough. Our identities in Christ will escape us for the mirage of abundance. The words of Kirk Franklin's famous gospel song "Silver and Gold" take on new meaning with the story of Naomi and Ruth. "I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold," Franklin sings. "No fame or fortune, nor riches untold. I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold."

Who hasn't declared with deep conviction what Jesus is worth to them? Yet it takes the poor, the marginalized, those with their backs against the wall to show us that he's more valuable than life itself (see Mark 12:44).

[NOVEMBER 15]

Prayers of Riot

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Psalm 16;
Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

IN 1 SAMUEL, Hannah's husband Elkanah goes down in biblical history as the worst listener. His is the most self-centered response you can give the woman you love when she is grieving: "Aren't I enough?" If you've had any measure of success in relationships, you're probably saying to yourself, "What was he thinking?" Thinking is probably exactly what he was doing when he should have been feeling, listening. Less thinking! The saint she is, Hannah turns to God. Yet Eli the priest, like Elkanah, gets in the way. Pastors are supposed to be professional listeners. That's far from what you find Eli doing. Hannah is not eating; she has been crying profusely. She turns to the "church" for support and care. She comes to express her deepest grief.

This is not the "power-of-a-praying-wife" type of prayer, though. Hannah is bitter. She is without a child, without a compassionate husband, and she's dealing with "haters" provoking her. Hannah's prayers are protest. Don't let her silence fool you. That she is praying silently may be the very indication that her words and disposition, left untamed, might have been too unconventional, unruly. After all, Eli mistakes even her visceral silent prayer for drunkenness.

Martin Luther King said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." So what do we make of the prayers of riot raised to the

The political kingdoms of this world glamorize muscle and power.

heavens over the neglect of black and brown bodies in our country? So much of our country remains deaf to these cries. White folks continue to ask the question: What can we do? However, an inability to identify is no excuse for not honoring another's prayers. May the whole church learn from Eli to pray with pastoral sensitivity for the unheard even if we don't all understand or agree: "God grant the petition *they* have made to you" (see 1 Samuel 1:17).



[NOVEMBER 22]

Out of the Fire

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14;
Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

PENTECOST BEGINS with tongues of fire and concludes with the fire of the *parousia*, the second coming. How appropriate as we enter Advent, the season of waiting. If we ever doubt that God will also make an entrance the second time around, the prophet Daniel ensures our recognition: "His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence" (7:9-10).

Contrary to Pilate in John's gospel, Jesus will not stand from the throne to condemn or engage in the pretense and divisiveness of identity politics ("Are you the king of the Jews?"). No! Jesus' kingship is marked by truth (John 18:37b), which means that what is godless and false about our lives will not be able to stand, but will wither away in the flames. This is not the callousness of fire and brimstone. Instead it's the burning hot love of Jesus' dominion. It takes special care to burn away those thorny places of our lives in order to refine us to be what God intended all along. This is gospel. May it be a message like fire in our bones. So much

so that it'll break loose and set the world on fire with love.

We'll get a head start on what Jesus will consummate when he returns. Only then will we see this kingdom's eternity, with a fire hot enough to burn away any trace of selfishness and ego, drawing together a community from all "peoples, nations, and languages" (Daniel 7:14).

[NOVEMBER 29]

You Pray For Me

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10;
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

IT'S THE FIRST week of Advent. By now you've already given the spiel you give every year about holding off on the Christmas carols. You've met the congregation halfway by inviting them to sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." And this is good. Because the posture we want to cultivate from the beginning of Advent is one of waiting, of expectancy. To turn Advent and Christmas into something altogether alien to Christian faith is just as tempting this year as last. We'll need to remind our people again this year that what we're waiting for is not presents, nor an 8 lb. 6 oz. baby Jesus, but "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27).

For many folks the "second coming" is not worth waiting for. They're expecting weeping and gnashing of teeth or nothing at all. Holiness is the diet while we wait. Not the "who's in" and "who's out" kind. Holiness, for Paul, is not marked by finger pointing but by concern and care. Our waiting for Jesus' second coming should be characterized by joy because of and for our neighbors, and a desire to restore to them whatever it is they are lacking (see 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10, 12). This won't be a twiddle-your-thumb type of waiting. We'll need to be busy building relationships with our neighbors so that this holiness can take shape in us, blameless shape, for Jesus' return.

Let's invite our people to sing songs that demonstrate this holiness. Hezekiah Walker's "I Need You to Survive" might do: "I need you. You need me. We're all a part of God's body." ■

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.



Answering the Call of the Mild

AS THE STIFLING heat of summer recedes and the winter months approach, I look forward to the promise of snowy walks, steaming hot cocoa, and the sounds of sleigh bells jingling down our street. (Actually, it's probably a garbage truck spilling bottles out the back, so never mind.) I love winter, because only in winter can I do my favorite thing: not go camping.

Yes, I know, lots of people camp in the winter. Some of my office colleagues are never happier than when

18th-century drudgery, but without the helpful oxen. Camping in a tent, with a family, is an unending process of menial labor that begins with deciding what to pack for the trip: everything except the couch. And then consists of an unalterable pattern which, in its entirety, is as follows:

- Pack the car completely full, blocking most windows and floor space. Put bikes on back of car.

- Remove bikes to get something inside back of car. Put bikes on back of car again.

- Drive, uncomfortably, for hours, although the stop at Dunkin' Donuts was nice. (We had a coupon, but it was in the back of the car.)

- Unpack the car. Set up the tent, which sleeps six and, in the critical eyes of Elizabeth Warren, is too big to fail, certainly too heavy to carry, so I drag it out of the back of the car onto the ground, which I immediately declare as The Campsite.

- Set up a replica of our entire house, minus couch, on dirt.

- Frantically search the car for things we need but, it turns out, did not bring.

- Find salt shaker in glove compartment. (High point of trip.)

- Eat every meal outdoors, sharing food with biting and stinging insects and one frog-like reptile that somehow got inside our screen tent (a contraption that poses as our kitchen, despite having no sink, no cupboards, and no refrigerator, so

no place to put my vintage photo magnets with clever sayings such as "Couch potato is my favorite vegetable.")

- Swear I just swallowed a bug, my third of the trip.

- Wish I had a couch to lie down on.

- Pack the car for home, filling empty coolers with dirty clothes, which will later smell like bean salad. Drive, then unpack the car at home, usually by myself, because, you know, it's been a long trip and family members would like to help but, oh look, there's the mail.

WHY IS IT that, in a nation with so much government oversight, families are legally permitted to camp? This is a problem that common-sense regulation could easily take care of. It could be as simple as impounding cars with windows blocked by sleeping bags, or banning any products bearing the name Coleman. Or better yet, subsidize patronage of cheap motels, which come with pre-inflated beds and, in some cases, running water that you don't have to carry back from a spigot 100 yards away, in the dark.

We tax cigarettes to discourage their use; why not tent camping? It's not addictive, but it should still come with a warning label from the Surgeon General: "Camping can cause extreme irritability in older males. Plus, there's no couch." ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

Camping is best left to those who, you know, actually like the outdoors.

their breath crystallizes in front of them as they hike through a wilderness in February, the frozen ground crunching beneath their feet. Me, I prefer the Great Indoors, thick terry-cloth robes, and the crunching of small Lego pieces beneath my slippers, a reminder that little girls should pick up their toys when they're done. Winter hiking is what I do between the kitchen and the living room, and then back again because I forgot something.

To me, winter is nature's way of telling us "mmphremsht," which I can't hear clearly, because I'm indoors and the windows are closed. But I think it's telling us to stay inside.

I'm not opposed to camping—I camped twice last summer—but I also don't hesitate to call it what it is: an exhausting exercise in

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